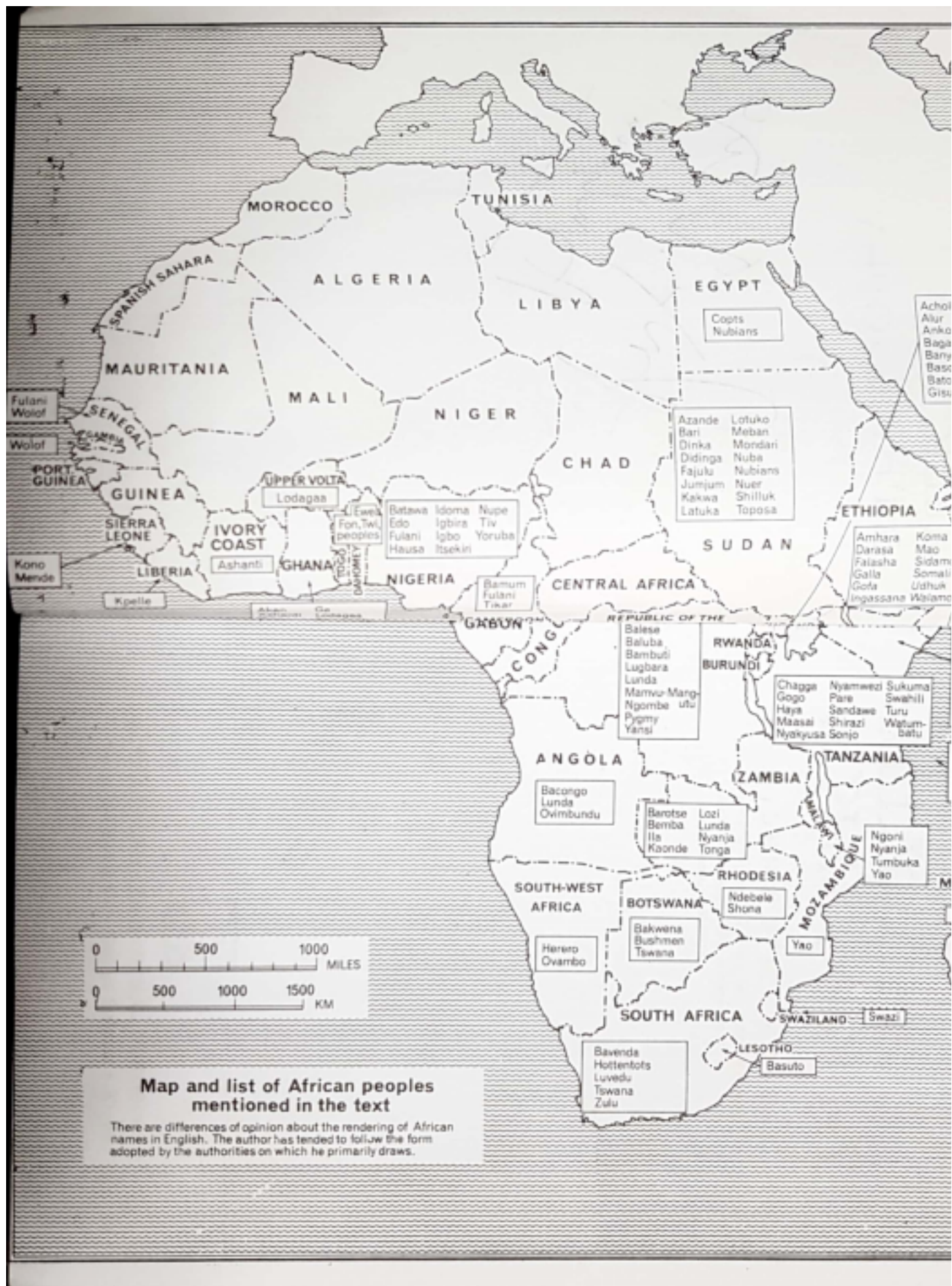
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African Religions & Philosophy

EAEP

John S. Mbiti



AFRICAN RELIGIONS & PHILOSOPHY

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EAST AFRICAN EDUCATIONAL PUBLISHERS
Nairobi • Kampala • Dar es Salaam • Kigali

Published by
East African Educational Publishers Ltd.
Brick Court, Mpaka Road/Woodvale Grove
Westlands, P.O. Box 45314, Nairobi

E-mail: eaep@eastafricanpublishers.com
Website: www.eastafricanpublishers.com

East African Educational Publishers Ltd.
P.O. Box 11542, Kampala, UGANDA.

Ujuzi Books Ltd.
P.O. Box 38260, Dar es Salaam, TANZANIA.

East African Educational Rwanda Ltd.
No. 86 Benjamin Street
Nyarutarama Gacururo, Gasabo District
P.O. Box 5151, Kigali, RWANDA

© John S. Mbiti 1969

First published 1969

Reprinted 19 times
This edition 2011

ISBN 9966-46-222-8

In grateful memory of
my uncle, Joel Mutia wa Nguangi
died 1 January 1967

Printed in Kenya by:
Sitima Printers & Stationers Ltd.
P.O. Box 53987, 00200 City Square.
Tel: 254 020 535407/8/9, Nairobi - Kenya
E-mail: info@sitimaprinters.com

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PREFACE

This book is an expansion of lectures to my students at Makerere College, Uganda, and Hamburg University, Germany. Not students in both universities show continued interest in the many requested that they be available in book form to meet textbook on the subject of African traditional religions and hope that this book will be a contribution in the study of the is increasingly coming into the curricula of universities, semin and senior secondary schools not only in Africa but overseas book is intended therefore for use in such institutions of hi and by readers who may have reached that standard of ed primarily an introduction to the subject, and for that reason I a minimum analytical interpretation. For the same reason I substantial references and bibliography, so that readers wish certain lines of interest might have a reading list with whic journals are not easily accessible except in large libraries, I have them in the footnote references, except occasionally, but listed in the select bibliography.

African Religions and Philosophy deals almost exclusively w concepts and practices in those societies which have no Christian or Muslim in any deep way, before the colonial per In my description I have generally used the present tense, a are still held and the practices being carried out. Everyone rapid changes are taking place in Africa, so that traditional abandoned, modified or coloured by the changing situation time it would be wrong to imagine that everything traditi changed or forgotten so much that no traces of it are to be fou the changes are generally on the surface, affecting the mater and only beginning to reach the deeper levels of thinking pa content, mental images, emotions, beliefs and response in sin Traditional concepts still form the essential background of peoples, though obviously this differs from individual to from place to place. I believe, therefore, that even if the edu do not subscribe to all the religious and philosophical pra described here, the majority of our people with little or no so still hold on to their traditional corpus of beliefs and pra

familiar with village gossip cannot question this fact; and those who have eyes will also notice evidence of it in the towns and cities.

In this study I have emphasized the unity of African religions and philosophy in order to give an overall picture of their situation. This approach does not give room for the treatment in depth of individual religious and philosophical systems of different African peoples. There is an increasing number of monographs coming out through which this aspect of study is being met, and I do not feel it necessary to duplicate the work when so many other fields remain scarcely harvested. I have therefore chosen to highlight both similarities and differences considering the African picture as a whole. For this reason, I have drawn examples from all over Africa, both making general observations and giving detailed illustrations.

Since modern change cannot be ignored, I have devoted one chapter to it towards the end of the book, emphasizing particularly the human aspects of this change and how these affect individuals and families. In another chapter I discuss the present situation of Christianity, Islam and other religions in Africa, all of which are very relevant to any study of traditional religions. Both Christianity and Islam are 'traditional' and 'African' in a historical sense, and it is a pity that they tend to be regarded as 'foreign' or 'European' and 'Arab'. It is, however, in their contact or relationship with traditional religions that I have discussed these other religions. The final chapter is an attempt to assess the place and role of religion in modern Africa which has inherited these different religious systems and is subjected to a world-wide and radical change.

I want to express my deep gratitude to my students at Makerere (since 1964) and Hamburg (1966-7), for reacting with such encouraging and stimulating response to the original lectures. Many who heard these lectures enriched some of the points with illustrations and comments from their own reflection and experiences. I valued these comments very much, and have incorporated some of them into the book, for which I am equally grateful. In innumerable ways my dear wife has been a constant source of help while I was working on the lectures and the book, especially in Hamburg, and to her I am duly indebted. The publishers have given me unending encouragement and co-operation from the time I contacted them about the manuscript. For this and for the quick production of the book, I am very thankful.

As much as possible I have acknowledged in the footnotes the sources of my information and quotations. Where a particular work is mentioned half a dozen or more times, only the author and pages of his book are given in the footnotes and full details of the work concerned will be found in the select bibliography. I apologize for any omissions in acknowledging the

Preface

sources, for misinterpreting or misrepresenting anyone's work, or errors in quoting other people's writings, where this may have occurred without my knowledge.

Makerere University College
Kampala, Uganda

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful acknowledgement is made for permission granted by either the authors or publishers to make quotations from the following works: J. B. Danquah, *The Akan* (Edinburgh House Press book) 1944; *Doctrine of God*, Lutterworth (an Edinburgh House Press book) 1944; E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, Clarendon Press, 1937; and *Nuer Religion*, Clarendon Press, 1956; M. J. Field, *Religion and Medicine of the Ga People*, Oxford University Press, 1937; D. Forde, ed., *African Worlds*, Oxford University Press, 1954; G. W. B. Huntingford, *The Nandi of Kenya*, Routledge, and Kegan Paul, 1953; E. B. Idowu, *Oduduwa: God in Yoruba Belief*, Longmans, Green & Co., 1962; J. Jahn, *Muntu*, Faber and Faber, ET 1961; I. M. Lewis, ed., *Islam in Tropical Africa*, Oxford University Press, 1966; G. Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience, the Religion of the Dinka*, Clarendon Press, 1961; R. A. Lystad, *The Ashanti: a Proud People*, Rutgers University Press, 1958; J. H. Nketia, *Faunal Dances of the Akan People*, Accra 1955; A. Oded, 'A Congregation of African Jews in the heart of Uganda', in *Divine Mists: Revealed Religion and Traditional Customs*, Vol. 3 No. 1, 1968; J. Okot p'Bitek, 'The Concept of Jok among the Acholi and Lango', in *The Uganda Journal*, Vol. XXVII No. 1, 1965; E. G. Parrinder, *West African Religion*, Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.) 1961; P. Schebesta, *My Pygmy and Negro Hosts*, Hutchinson & Co., ET 1936; *Revising my Pygmy Hosts*, Hutchinson & Co., ET 1936; E. W. Smith and A. M. Dale, *The Ila-Speaking Peoples of Northern Rhodesia*, Macmillan, Vol. 1, 1920; E. W. Smith, ed. (later E. G. Parrinder), *African Ideas of God*, Lutterworth (an Edinburgh House Press book) 1950; T. C. Young, *Contemporary Ancestors*, Lutterworth (an Edinburgh House Press book) n.d.

1

INTRODUCTION

Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to study of these religious systems is, therefore, ultimately a study of peoples themselves in all the complexities of both traditional and modern life. Our written knowledge of traditional religions is comparatively though increasing, and comes chiefly from anthropologists and historians. Practically nothing has been produced by theologians, devoted to interpreting these religions theologically.

We speak of African traditional religions in the plural because about one thousand African peoples (tribes), and each has its own system. These religions are a reality which calls for academic study which must be reckoned with in modern fields of life like politics, education, and Christian or Muslim work. To ignore traditional beliefs, attitudes and practices can only lead to a less understanding African behaviour and problems. Religion is the strong in traditional background, and exerts probably the greatest influence on the thinking and living of the people concerned.

While religion can be discerned in terms of beliefs, ceremonies and religious officials, philosophy is not so easily distinguished. We shall consider different religions in terms of their similarities and differences to give us a picture of the overall situation in Africa. But, since there are parallel philosophical systems which can be observed in similar terms, we shall use the singular, 'philosophy', to refer to the general understanding of African peoples concerning different aspects of life. Philosophy of one kind or another is behind the thinking of every people, and a study of traditional religions brings us into contact with African life where, through word and action, we may be able to see the philosophy behind. This involves interpretation of the religions before us, and interpretation cannot be completely free of subjectivity. What, therefore, is 'African Philosophy', may not amount to a single philosophy.

than simply my own process of philosophizing the items under consideration: but this cannot be helped, and in any case I am by birth an African. Philosophical systems of different African peoples have not yet been formulated, but some of the areas where they may be found are in the religion, proverbs, oral traditions, ethics and morals of the society concerned. I have incorporated some of these areas into this study, but proverbs in particular deserve a separate treatment since their philosophical content is mainly situational. We do not however have many comprehensive collections of African proverbs out of which an overall analysis of this type of philosophy could be undertaken. 'African philosophy' here refers to the understanding, attitude of mind, logic and perception behind the manner in which African peoples think, act or speak in different situations of life.

Because traditional religions permeate all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and the material areas of life. Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields where he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony; and if he is educated, he takes religion with him to the examination room at school or in the university; if he is a politician he takes it to the house of parliament. Although many African languages do not have a word for religion as such, it nevertheless accompanies the individual from long before his birth to long after his physical death. Through modern change these traditional religions cannot remain intact, but they are by no means extinct. In times of crisis they often come to the surface, or people revert to them in secret.

Traditional religions are not primarily for the individual, but for his community of which he is part. Chapters of African religions are written everywhere in the life of the community, and in traditional society there are no irreligious people. To be human is to belong to the whole community, and to do so involves participating in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community. A person cannot detach himself from the religion of his group, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundation, his context of security, his kinships and the entire group of those who make him aware of his own existence. To be without one of these corporate elements of life is to be out of the whole picture. Therefore, to be without religion amounts to a self-excommunication from the entire life of society, and African peoples do not know how to exist without religion.

One of the sources of severe strain for Africans exposed to modern change is the increasing process (through education, urbanization and industrialization) by which individuals become detached from their traditional environment. This leaves them in a vacuum devoid of a solid

religious foundation. They are torn between the life of which, whatever else might be said about it, has historical traditions, and the life of our technological age which, as Africans has no concrete form or depth. In these circumstances and Islam do not seem to remove the sense of frustration and It is not enough to learn and embrace a faith which is active either on Sunday or Friday, while the rest of the week is idle. It is not enough to embrace a faith which is confined to a church or mosque, which is locked up six days and opened only a week. Unless Christianity and Islam fully occupy the person as much as, if not more than, traditional religions do, most of the faithful will continue to revert to their old beliefs and practices six days a week, and certainly in times of emergency and crisis environment and the whole time must be occupied by religion so that at any moment and in any place, a person feels secure in a meaningful and religious consciousness. Since traditional religions occupy the whole person and the whole of his life, conventional religions like Christianity and Islam must embrace his language, patterns, fears, social relationships, attitudes and philosophies if that conversion is to make a lasting impact upon the individual community.

A great number of beliefs and practices are to be found in every society. These are not, however, formulated into a systematic religion which a person is expected to accept. People simply assimilate religious ideas and practices are held or observed by the communities. These traditions have been handed down from generation to generation and each generation takes them up with modifications suited to the historical situation and needs. Individuals hold different views on various subjects; and the myths, rituals and ceremonies may vary from area to area. But such ideas or views are not considered contrary or conforming to any orthodox opinion. Therefore, in this book that such and such a society 'believes', or 'narrates' such and such, we do not by any means imply that every society subscribes to that belief or performs that ritual. The beliefs and acts, and there can be no unanimity in such beliefs and practices. In traditional religions there are no creeds to be written; the creeds are written in the heart of the individual, and each has a living creed of his own religion. Where the individual is not religious, for he is a religious being. It is this that makes religious religion in their whole system of being.

One of the difficulties in studying African religions and

that there are no sacred scriptures. Religion in African societies is written not on paper but in people's hearts, minds, oral history, rituals and religious personages like the priests, rainmakers, officiating elders and even kings. Everybody is a religious carrier. Therefore we have to study not only the beliefs concerning God and the spirits, but also the religious journey of the individual from before birth to after physical death; and to study also the persons responsible for formal rituals and ceremonies. What people do is motivated by what they believe, and what they believe springs from what they do and experience. So then, belief and action in African traditional society cannot be separated: they belong to a single whole.

Traditional religions are not universal: they are tribal or national. Each religion is bound and limited to the people among whom it has evolved. One traditional religion cannot be propagated in another tribal group. This does not rule out the fact that religious ideas may spread from one people to another. But such ideas spread spontaneously, especially through migrations, intermarriage, conquest, or expert knowledge being sought by individuals of one tribal group from another. Traditional religions have no missionaries to propagate them; and one individual does not preach his religion to another.

Similarly, there is no conversion from one traditional religion to another. Each society has its own religious system, and the propagation of such a complete system would involve propagating the entire life of the people concerned. Therefore a person has to be born in a particular society in order to assimilate the religious system of the society to which he belongs. An outsider cannot enter or appreciate fully the religion of another society. Those few Europeans who claim to have been 'converted' to African religions—and I know some who make such fantastic claims!—do not know what they are saying. To pour out libation or observe a few rituals like Africans, does not constitute conversion to traditional religions.

African religions have neither founders nor reformers. They may, however, incorporate national heroes, leaders, rulers and other famous men and women into their body of beliefs and mythology. Some of these figures are elevated to high national positions and may even be regarded as divinities responsible for natural objects or phenomena. These heroes and heroines form an integral part of the religious milieu of their society, whether or not they played a specifically religious role in their time.

Belief in the continuation of life after death is found in all African societies, as far as I have been able to discover. But this belief does not constitute a hope for a future and better life. To live here and now is the most important concern of African religious activities and beliefs. There is little, if any, concern with the distinctly spiritual welfare of man apart

Introduction

from his physical life. No line is drawn between the physical and the spiritual. Even life in the hereafter is conceived in material terms. There is neither paradise to be hoped for nor hell to be feared hereafter. The soul of man does not long for spiritual rest or closer contact with God in the next world. This is an important feature of traditional religions, and one which will help us to understand the concentration of African religiosity on earthly matters, with no concern of this religiosity. It is here also that the question of African time is so important. Traditional religions and philosophies explain man's contact with time. There is no messianic or apocalyptic vision with God stepping in at some future moment about a radical reversal of man's normal life. God is not concerned with an ethical-spiritual relationship with man. Man's acts of worship to God are pragmatic and utilitarian rather than spiritual. With our incomplete knowledge of African religions, we cannot describe their history. On the whole, however, they seem to be fairly stable, quietly assimilating new ideas and practices from time to time. National crises like warfare, famines, epidemics, locust invasions, changes in the weather cause a revival of religious activities and of new ones. Since people are so intimately bound up with their life and outlook, their history constitutes the history of the society. This is an area of study which calls for interdisciplinary co-operation of historians, anthropologists and theologians. I have made this book to deal with the historical aspects of African religions, but not aware of any study having been done along those lines. This book is chiefly descriptive and interpretive, bringing together here those elements which are representative of traditional religions over Africa. In such a general survey, there is no room to discuss the unique and complex religious system of each people; but the detailed illustrations used here and drawn from many sources will not only indicate this complexity of African religions, but in part what otherwise could not be covered in depth.

2 THE STUDY OF AFRICAN RELIGIONS & PHILOSOPHY

The world is just beginning to take African traditional religions and philosophy seriously. It is only around the middle of the twentieth century that these subjects have begun to be studied properly and respectfully as an academic discipline in their own right. During the preceding one hundred years African religions were described by European and American missionaries and by students of anthropology, sociology and comparative religion. It is from these writers that we have most of our information, although some of them had never been to Africa and only a few had done serious field study of these religions. In the early part of that period, the academic atmosphere was filled with the theory of evolution which was applied in many fields of study. It is this theory which colours many of the earlier descriptions, interpretations and explanations of African religions. We shall consider briefly some of the early approaches before coming to the present situation.¹

(a) *The early approaches and attitudes*

One of the dominating attitudes in this early period was the assumption that African beliefs, cultural characteristics and even foods, were all borrowed from the outside world. German scholars pushed this assumption to the extreme, and have not all abandoned it completely to this day. All kinds of theories and explanations were put forward on how the different religious traits had reached African societies from the Middle East or Europe. It is true that Africa has always had contact with the outside world, but religious and cultural influence from this contact cannot have flowed only one way: there was always a give-and-take process. Furthermore, African soil is not so infertile that it cannot produce its own new ideas. This game of hunting for outside sources is dying out, and there are writers who now argue that in fact it was Africa which exported ideas, cultures and civilization to the

¹ For further study of the earlier theories see E. E. Evans-Pritchard *Theories of primitive religion* (Oxford 1965).

The Study of African Religions & Philosophy

outside world.¹ But surely a balance between these two extremes is reasonable.

These earlier descriptions and studies of African religions in terms which are inadequate, derogatory and prejudicial, betray the kind of attitude and interpretation dominant in the who invented or propagated the different theories about tradition. *Animism* is a word derived from the Latin *anima* which means breath of life, and hence carries with it the idea of the soul. The term has become the most popular designation for African religions found in many writings even this day. It was invented by the anthropologist, E. B. Tylor, who used it first in an article in 1871 in his book, *Primitive Culture* (1871). For Tylor the basic religion was the 'belief in spirit beings'. He saw the animist as a vaporous image animating the object it occupied. He thought so-called 'primitive people' imagined the anima to be capable of body and entering other men, animals or things; and continuing after death. Pursuing the theory further, Tylor went on to say that 'primitive' men considered every object to have its own soul rise to countless spirits in the universe.

Tylor's ideas were popularized by his disciples. Since then *animism* has come to be widely used in describing traditions in Africa and other parts of the world. In an atmosphere filled with the theory of evolution, the notion of countless spirits opened the way for religious evolution. This led on to the theory that single spirits were each major department of nature. For example, all the spirits would have one major spirit in charge of them, and the spirits of rocks, lakes and so on. Accordingly, this gave man the idea of *polytheism*, which in turn evolved further to the stage of one god over all the other departmental spirits. We might illustrate this by a diagram (see page 8).

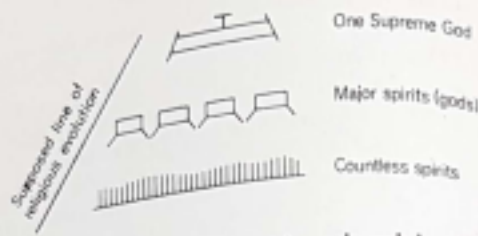
This type of argument and interpretation places African religions at the bottom of the supposed line of religious evolution. It tells us that Christianity and Islam are at the top, since they are monotheistic. The theory fails to take into account the fact that another theory holds that man's religious development began with a monotheism which evolved towards polytheism and animism. We need not concern ourselves here with either theory. We can only comment that African religions are aware of all these elements of religion: God, spirits and divinity.

¹ For example J. Jahn *Muntu* (E. T. London 1961); B. Davids *The growth of African civilization* (London 1961), and *The growth of African civilization* (London 1961). *Diop Antériorité des civilisations nègres: Mythe ou réalité historique?*

Monothism

Polytheism

Animism



of the traditional body of beliefs. Christianity and Islam acknowledge the same type of spiritual beings. The theory of religious evolution, in which, ever direction, does not satisfactorily explain or interpret African religions. Animism is not an adequate description of these religions and it is better for that term to be abandoned once and for all.

In classifying the religions of the world, we hear that 'redemptive religions' like Christianity, Judaism and Islam incorporate into their teaching the doctrine of the soul's redemption in the next world. 'Morality religions' like Shintoism and the teachings of Confucius lay a great emphasis on moral considerations. Finally, 'primitive religions' are those whose followers are described by some writers as 'savage', 'primitive' and lacking in either imagination or emotion.¹ Of course the word primitive in its Latin root *primus* has no bad connotations as such, but the way it is applied to African religions shows a lack of respect and betrays derogatory undertones. It is extraordinary that even in our day, fellow man should continue to be described as 'savage' and lacking in emotion or imagination. This approach to the study of African religions will not go very far, neither can it qualify as being scientifically or theologically adequate. Some traditional religions are extremely complex and contain elements which shed a lot of light on the study of other religious traditions of the world.

In his book, *Principles of Sociology* (1885), the anthropologist Herbert Spencer used the phrase *ancestor worship* to describe his speculation that 'savage' peoples associated the spirits of the dead with certain objects, and in order to keep on good terms with the spirits of their ancestors, people made sacrifices to them. Other writers have borrowed this term and applied it almost to anything that Africans do in the way of religious ceremonies. Many books speak of 'ancestor worship' to describe African religions. Certainly it cannot be denied that the departed occupy an important place in African religiosity; but it is wrong to interpret traditional religions simply in terms of 'worshipping the ancestors'. As we shall see later in this book,

¹ See for example J. N. D. Anderson, ed., *The World's Religions* (third edition London 1960), p. 9 f.

the departed, whether parents, brothers, sisters or children, family, and must therefore be kept in touch with their survivors. Libation and the giving of food to the departed are tokens of hospitality and respect; the drink and food so given are symbols of continuity and contact. 'Worship' is the wrong word to use in this situation; and Africans themselves know very well that 'worshipping' the departed members of their family. It is almost therefore, to describe these acts of family relationships as 'worship'. More, African religions do not end at the level of family rites and food offerings. They are deeper and more comprehensive than them only in terms of 'ancestor worship' is to isolate a single aspect of religion in some societies is of little significance, and to be blind to the aspects of religion.

Other writers have tried to study or refer to African religion as magic. Some consider magic to have evolved before religion, and attempt to manipulate the unseen world. When man first discovered natural objects and phenomena by means of magic, he then turned to forces beyond him, which in turn led to a belief in God of all power. As such, magic is considered to be the most primitive religion. Since every African society has both magic and religion, it is to conclude that Africans had not evolved beyond the stage of religion from magic. Some writers even tell us that African religion at all and only magic. We shall devote a whole chapter to the subject of magic, and there is an increasing amount of good material on it. We need here only comment briefly. A careful examination of African societies shows that magic is part of the religious tradition and it is not easy to separate the two. Some of the ceremonies in rainmaking and preventing of epidemics, incorporate both magic and religion. So long as magical acts are beneficial to the community, they are acceptable and people may even pay a great deal of money in order to secure such help. This gives no contradiction. Magic belongs to the religious mentality of African people. Religion is not magic, and magic cannot explain religion. Religion

¹ See earlier writers like: E. Durkheim *The elementary forms of religion* (E.T. London 1915); J. Frazer *Totemism* (London 1917); *A scientific theory of culture and other essays* (London 1944); E. Durkheim *Origin of religion* (London 1917); P. Radin *Primitive religion* (London 1929); R. Allier *The mind of the savage* (London 1929). See also, for discussion, E. G. Parrinder *African Traditional Religion* (London 1960); Boquet *Comparative Religion* (London 1942); W. Schmidt *Die Gottesidee* (Vol. IV deals specifically with Africa, under the title *Religionen der Urvölker Afrikas*, Münster 1931).

magic, and only an ignorant outsider could imagine that African religions are nothing more than magic.

Other terms employed to describe African religions include *Dynumism*, *Totemism*, *Fetichism* and *Natureism*. We need not go into them here. These and the previous terms show clearly how little the outside world has understood African religions. Some of the terms are being abandoned as more knowledge comes to light. But the fact remains that African religions and philosophy have been subjected to a great deal of misinterpretation, misrepresentation and misunderstanding. They have been despised, mocked and dismissed as primitive and underdeveloped. One needs only to look at the earlier titles and accounts to see the derogatory language used, prejudiced descriptions given and false judgments passed upon these religions. In missionary circles they have been condemned as superstition, satanic, devilish and hellish. In spite of all these attacks, traditional religions have survived, they dominate the background of African peoples, and must be reckoned with even in the middle of modern changes.

[b] *Modern and current studies*
In recent years a change of approach and attitude has begun to take place. We mention here some of the books and new methods, without elaborating on them. The first of these new approaches is represented by writers like Tempels, Jahn and Taylor. In his book, *Bantu Philosophy* (French edition 1945, English 1959), P. Tempels presents his understanding of Baluba religion and philosophy, starting from the attitude that 'primitive peoples have a concrete conception of being and of the universe'. He goes on to say that 'this "ontology" of theirs will give a special character and a local colour to their beliefs and religious practices, to their language, to their institutions and customs, to their psychological reactions and, more generally, to their whole behaviour'. For Tempels the key concept to African religions and philosophy is what he calls 'the vital force'. He isolates this as the essence of being: 'force is being, and being is force'. His philosophy of forces explains for him everything about African thinking and action.

Whatever else is said about Tempels' book, it opens the way for a sympathetic study of African religions and philosophy. His motive and that of the fellow colonialists whom he addresses, is 'to civilize, educate and raise the Bantu'. The book is primarily Tempels' personal interpretation of the Baluba, and it is ambitious to call it 'Bantu philosophy' since it only deals with one people among whom he had worked for many years as a missionary. It is open to a great deal of criticism, and the theory of 'vital force' cannot be applied to other African peoples with whose life and ideas I am familiar. The main contribution of Tempels is more in terms of

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sympathy and change of attitude than perhaps in the actual theory of his book.

In the same group is J. Jahn's book, *Muntu* (German 1961, English 1961), which deals primarily with what he calls 'culture'. He devotes one section to African philosophy, while art, dance, history and literature. It covers a great part of African material being collected through wide reading. In the religious section Jahn adopts the categories of A. Kagame (from Rwanda) and squeezes everything into one of four categories:

Muntu is the philosophical category which includes God, departed, human beings and certain trees. These constitute the world endowed with intelligence.

Kintu includes all the 'forces' which do not act on their own but under the command of *Muntu*, such as plants, animals, minerals, etc.

Hantu is the category of time and space.

Kuntu is what he calls 'modality', and covers items like beauty, etc.

According to Jahn's interpretation, 'all being, all essence, in v... it is conceived, can be subsumed under one of these categories. ... be conceived outside them'. He sticks to Tempels' concept of 'force' and tells us that 'man is a force, all things are forces, place and time and the "modalities" are forces'. These items are supposed to be the purely linguistic stem - NTU which occurs in all the languages in which the categories are based. Jahn supposes this - NTU is a universal force . . . which, however, never occurs apart from its manifestations: *Muntu*, *Kintu*, *Hantu* and *Kuntu*. NTU is Being itself, a universal force . . . NTU is that force in which Being and becoming . . . NTU expresses, not the effect of these forces, but their being. Forces act continually, and are constantly effective' (pp. 99 ff.). This mythical or imaginary NTU would be revealed only if the universe came to a standstill.

The main contribution of Jahn's book is in pointing out that Africa has something of philosophical value which deserves to be seriously and studied accordingly. In his enthusiasm about Africa he may have overstated his case (he says, for instance, that European philosophy to compare with African philosophy). But he has argued his case with conviction and has put them across persuasively, whether one accepts or rejects them.

In the English world this sympathetic approach to African

From West Germany comes E. Dammann's book, *Die Religionen*

There are, in addition, articles and essays contributed by African scholars. There is great potential in African scholars studying African religions and philosophy, with the aid of scientific tools and methodology and with the advantages of being part of the peoples of Africa, having almost unlimited access to information and speaking the languages which are the key to serious research and understanding of traditional religions and philosophy.

My approach in this book is to treat religion as an ontological phenomenon, with the concept of time as the key to reaching some understanding of African religions and philosophy. I do not pretend that the notion of time explains everything, but I am convinced that it adds to our understanding of the subject, and if that much is achieved, these efforts will have been more than adequately rewarded.

3

THE CONCEPT OF TIME

Religion is a difficult weed to detect, and it becomes even more so in the context of African traditional life. I do not attempt to answer the question of existence or being. We have already seen that within traditional life, the individual is immersed in a religious world which starts before birth and continues after his death. For the individual and for the larger community of which he is part, to live is to live up in a religious drama. This is fundamental, for it means that the individual is living in a religious universe. Both that world and practically all that is seen and experienced through a religious understanding. Names of people have religious meanings in them; tools are not just empty objects, but religious objects; the sun speaks a religious language; the eclipse of the sun or moon is a religious phenomenon of nature, but one which speaks to the individual that observes it, often warning of an impending catastrophe. The point here is that the whole of existence is a religious phenomenon; man is a being living in a religious universe. Failure to realize this as a starting point, has led missionaries, anthropologists, colonialists and other foreign writers on African religions to misunderstand the religions as such but the peoples of Africa. This, among other things, has resulted in the tragedy of establishing since the mid-nineteenth century only a very superficial type of African religion. Although Islam has generally accommodated itself more readily than western Christianity, it also is professed in areas where it has recently won converts. Neither faith has been taken deeply into the religious world of traditional African life. So, 'conversion' to Christianity or Islam must be taken in a different sense.

Africans have their own ontology, but it is a religious ontology. To understand their religions we must penetrate that ontology. To divide it up into five categories, but it is an extremely



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