

**THE NEED FOR A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF AFRICAN
INDIGENOUS RELIGION**

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ABSTRACT

The paper observes that the psychological interpretation of religion is one of the earliest approaches of studying religion especially the Indigenous religious traditions. The initial studies concentrated on the Indigenous religions of some Americans, Europeans, Asians and Australian societies to the total neglect of the African situation. Worst still, scholars of African Religion or Indigenous Religion in their search for methodology equally ignored the psychological perspective. Now that psychology of religion is well established as an academic discipline, time has come for the African scholars to wake up from their deep slumber and provide a psychological interpretation of Africa religious experience embedded in their cultural heritage. The paper highlights the areas in which this approach would be helpful in the understanding of African religious culture.

INTRODUCTION

Psychology is the science of human behavior, while religion is basically concerned with the supernatural or the sacred. The latter deals with attitude and values emanating from experience of the sacred. Religious experience and expression is behavioral in nature. It fit well in the sphere of psychology. Psychology of religion is the field of study which employs psychological principles, techniques and interpretation to explore as well as to explain religious

behavior of man. It studies religious experiences, beliefs and activities. According to Ekwunife (2003:13-14) psychological study of religion focuses on individual mental states as opposed to culturally transmitted teachings and socially acquired behaviors. Psychological definition of religion pertains to the beliefs, emotions, and behavior of ordinary human beings, which arise in response to or are about some specific religious teachings and doctrines as well as from one's experience in the world .It is within the domain of psychology of religion to investigate what is taught and how ordinary individuals assimilate the material taught. The relationship is the concern of personal research.

William James 1842-1910, a United States Psychologist and philosopher is regarded as the founder of psychology of religion as a field of study. (www.wikipedia.org). This area of study seems to have been neglected and not given its proper place in religious studies in general and the Indigenous religion in particular. Petrovich (2007:356) accounted for the weak interaction between scientific psychology and study of religion in general. This could be applied to African indigenous Religion. It is partly explained by the misconceptions about psychology among religious scholars. Religions experts have questioned the possibility of objective psychological study of religious phenomenon on the grounds that religion is subjective phenomenon. Eliade a well known international scholar of religion, for example, said that psychology misses the element of sacred. Again some religious scholars tend to associate the whole of psychology to

psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud. Again, the early faulty and erroneous psychological explanations of religions experience by Freud, Frazer, Taylor, Spencer, etc. might have made religious scholars bias of any meaningful psychological study of religion.

Petrovich (2007:356) further explained why experimental psychologists have tended to ignore religion as a domain of human cognition. First, the standard psychological education does not prepare researchers for tackling specifically religious issues. Second, religions experiences are used to doctrinally committed and practicing adults and other non-religious. This is not applicable to African Religion. Religious experience is used to refer to prayer, conversion, mysticism and worship.

Today, there is a better understanding and appreciation of religion and psychology as being supplementary and complementary. Modern psychologists have been quite successful at designing methods that allow objective study of mental states for instance, experimental and under laboratory conditions. This will be very useful in the study of religion in general and the Indigenous traditions in particular. Religion too is fast embracing science to become more relevant in this era of scientific technology and globalization.

EARLIEST PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERPRETERS OF INDIGENOUS RELIGIONS

The intrinsic connection between psychology and religion started a very long time in human life. But the origin of the academic psychological approach to

the study of indigenous religions could be traced to the nineteenth century when Europe was at its height of civilization. There was a sharp division in which human race was divided into civilized and primitive societies. Civilized mentality involved the ability to think logically, analyses, and seeking the cause of natural phenomena while primitive mentality was thought to be associated with underdeveloped people, pre-logical and mystical in nature. The emergence of the study of religion was motivated by Charles Darwin's theory of evolution that was instrumental to the spread the above ideals. According to Chepkwony (2003:152-154) scholars used it and advanced theories of the origin of religion. At this time too the psychological interpreters of religion set out to give reasons for the beliefs and ritual practices of small scale non-literate technologically backward societies. They also wanted to give reasons for the persistence of such beliefs and rites as well as their origin. In other words, attempts were made to understand and give reasonable explanations to the beliefs and ritual practices of the so-called preliterate or primitive societies of the world.

We shall now consider some of the forefathers of the psychological interpretation of religion. The forefathers and their theories were couched in intellectualist terms and under the influence of the associationalist psychology of the time. We shall consider the ghost and soul theories. It must be borne in mind that before these theories become generally accepted they had to contest the field with others of the nature-myth school. It was predominantly a German school

concerned with Indo-European religions. The thesis being that the gods of antiquity and by implication gods any where and at all times, were personified natural phenomena like the sun, moon, stars, rivers, mountains among others. Max Muller, a powerful representative of the school held that man has always had an intuition of the divine, the idea of infinite –his word for God-deriving from sensory experience. Muller did not want to be understood as suggesting that religion began by men deifying natural objects, but rather that these gave him a feeling of the infinite and also served as symbols for it. The infinite according to Muller once the idea had arisen, could only be thought of in metaphor and symbol, which could only be taken from what seemed majestic in the known world, such as the heavenly bodies, or rather their attributes. But these attributes then lost their original and metaphorical sense and achieved autonomy by becoming personified as deities in their own right. He held that the only way we can discover the meaning of early man is by philosophical and etymological research, which restores to the names of gods and the stories told about them, their original sense (Evans-Pritchard , 1965:21-22).

Muller dealt with the belief in the human soul and its ghostly form in a similar manner. When humans wished to express a distinction between the body and something other than the body, the name that suggested itself was breath, something immaterial and connected with life. Then the word ‘psyche’ came to express the principle of life, and then the soul, the mind, the self. After death the

psyche went into Hades, the place of the invisible. Similarly the word for ghost originally meant breath, and the word for shades (of the departed) meant shadow. They were at first figurative expressions which eventually achieved concreteness. Scholars have criticized Muller and his fellow nature mythologists as at best, erudite guesswork. It could not be supported by adequate historical evidence,

Herbert Spencer (1820-1904) in his ghost theory of the origin of religion, he propounded that the rudimentary forms of all religions is propitiation of dead ancestors who are supposed to be still existing and are capable of working good or evil to their descendants. To him religion developed from homogeneity to heterogeneity. He is the originator of the term ancestor worship that is most criticized by scholars of the indigenous religions today. Primitive man for Spencer is rational, and given his small knowledge, his inferences are reasonable, if weak. He sees natural phenomena as sun and moon, clouds and stars, come and go. This gives him the notion of duality, of visible and invisible conditions (no idea of natural explanation). If other things could be dualities why not man himself? His shadows and his reflection in water also come and go. In another dimension, dreams are real experiences which gave man the idea of his own duality. He identified the dream-self which wanders at night with the shadow-self which appears by day. This is further fortified by experiences of temporary insensibility like sleeping, snoring and so on. Death itself comes to be thought of as only a

prolonged form of insensibility. Man has a double, a soul, same is applicable to animals, plants and material object.

The origin of religion according to him should be looked for in the belief in ghost rather than in souls. Soul has a temporary after-life is suggested by the appearance of the dead in dreams, so long as the dead are remembered; and the first traceable conception of a supernatural being is that of a ghost. This is earlier than the belief in the existence of an indwelling ghost or spirit (fetish). The idea of ghosts develops into that of gods, the ghosts of remote ancestors or superior persons becoming divinities. The conclusion he drew is that ancestor-worship is the root of every religion.

Modern scholars have criticized Spencer, if the ideas of soul and ghost arose from such fallacious reasoning, about clouds, butterflies, dreams, and trances, the benefits could have persisted throughout millennia and could still be held by Millions of civilized people in his day and ours.

Edward B. Tylor (1832-1917) developed the theory of the origin of religion known as animism in his book on primitive culture. He believed that religion developed from animism to polytheism and finally to monotheism. The theory of animism is similar to Spencer. He stresses the idea of soul rather than of ghost. That creatures and inanimate objects have life and personality and in addition they have souls. According to him, the reflections of primitive people on experiences as death, disease, trances, visions, and dreams; led them to the conclusion that they

are to be accounted for by the presence or absence of some immaterial entity- the soul. The soul is detachable from whatever it lodged in and there arose the idea of spiritual beings, and these finally developed into gods. The gods are superior to man and control his destiny. He also tried to distinguished magic from religion.

Sir James Frazer devoted his work on primitive superstition. He introduced two new suppositions, the one pseudo historical and the other psychological. According to Frazer, mankind every where, and sooner or later, passes through three stages of intellectual development, from magic to religion, and from religion to science. No one accepts Frazer's theory of stages of development today.

The psychological aspect of Frazer's thesis oppose magic and science to religion. Magic and science postulating a world subject to invariable natural laws and the last a world in which events depend on caprice Spirits. The first two (magic and science) perform their operations with confidence while in the latter, the priest performs in fear and trembling. Therefore, psychologically magic and science are alike, though one happens to be true and the other false but both are techniques. Frazer made the same mistake in method as levy-Bruhi, in comparing modern science with primitive magic, instead of comparing empirical and magical techniques in the same cultural conditions.

Others writers have argued that there must have been an earlier and cruder stage of religion than the animistic one was asserted by other writers besides Frazer and king. Andrew Lang, an evolutionary theorist refused to accept that the

gods could have developed out of ghosts and spirits. He concluded that the conception of God need not be evolved out of reflections on dreams and ghosts. Monotheism may even have proceeded animism. Monotheism was prior, and was corrupted and degraded by later animistic ideas.

Ernest Crawly asserts that religion is a product of fear and the spirits in which primitive peoples believe are no more than conceptualization of danger and fear. The greater the dangers, the more of religion. God is said to be a product of psychobiological processes.

R.H. Lowie studied Crow Indians and concluded that primitive religion is characterized by a sense of extra ordinary, mysterious or supernatural and the religious response is that of amazement and awe. Like Ernest Crawley, he held that there is no specifically religious behavior, only religious feelings. The crow Indians belief in ghosts of the dead is not religions belief because the subject has no emotional interest to them. Paul Radin also held that there is no specific religious behavior only a religious feeling, a more than normal sensitiveness to certain beliefs and customs which manifests itself in a thrill a feeling of exhilaration, exaltation, and awe and in a complete absorption in internal sensations (Evans-Pritchard, 1965:29-40).

We now turn to Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). He is best remembered as the originator of psychoanalysis. It is a method of treating those mental disorders commonly designated as the neuroses. Freud's psychoanalytic theory is really a

threefold disciplines-clinical treatment of neurotic conflict, general theory of personality or mind, and theory of culture and religion (morality, cruel life, society, history and Art). The foundation of the analytic situation is the unconscious and childhood experiences. Religion arose and is maintained by feelings, of guilt. He told the story of children who killed their father and later regretted of their action. Sacrifices and worship were instituted asking for forgiveness and the image of God was created. In same vein, the childhood mentality of a child's attitude toward his father, of seeking protection, help in times of difficulty is the origin of religion. God is an illusion which the imaginary father which childhood mentality leads man to form in his mind. These thoughts and feelings appear symbolically in dreams. Freud recognized religion as a complex phenomenon. He was interested in religion than he was in any other manifestation of culture. He approached religion in the context of culture as a whole –the social arrangements and systems of symbols that integrate a community of people.

Freud also wrote about art, morality, fairy tales, legends, myths and rituals. In his psychology of myths, they are to be understood after the fashion of dreams. They are both imaginative, composed of symbols, experienced, and are produced by unconscious forces. He concluded that myths are collective or group fantasies. Dreams and dream symbolism were keys to his patients' unconscious thinking and also to their symptoms. Religious symbols and myths are modeled upon dreams. The most effective cure for the neurosis since men cannot be children for ever, is

intellectual sophistication and scientific knowledge. Highly intelligent men over the years are still religious, shows that the remedy prescribed by Freud is not very effective (Omoregbe, 1999:7).

CRITICISMS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES OF RELIGION

The psychological theories of the origin, development and nature of religion, we have considered are highly controversial and generated heated arguments among scholars of religion. Contemporary scholars one after the other found the theories unsatisfactory. Most of them were involved in this study of the indigenous religions during this period were not trained in religion. Majority of them were social anthropologists, and sociologists. Religion was portrayed as the manifestation of the lowest scale of development that was believed would be overtaken by science. They made too much distinction between modern and traditional ways of thinking, civilized and primitive beliefs and practices. They failed to give reasons for the persistence of these beliefs and magical rites in civilized worlds of Europe and America. In the same way most of the psychological interpreters of religion did not do any field work on primitive beliefs and practices before writing out their conclusions. Rather the materials for their writings were given to them by people who were not committed to studying religion like travelers, missionaries, merchants and colonial officers. We now live in the twentieth first century, an era that is most remarkable in science and technology but religion is very relevant and is going scientific in its study. If

religion arose from fallacious reasoning how it could have persisted throughout the millennia and could still be held by scientists and civilized people of the world? Be that as it may, they threw useful insights on concepts for explanation of religious experiences and further research into indigenous religions. They collectively touch on concepts that became fundamental in religion with such as God, gods, dreams, ghost, dualism, soul, spirits, cults, death, magic, science, taboos and myths.

The Associationist psychology which was more or less mechanistic theory of sensation, was giving way to experimental psychology, under the influence of which anthropologists make use of the terms in a common sense way. We see more of affective (not cognitive), mind, instincts and emotional sentiments. With the passage of time we have psychoanalysis of complexes, inhibitions and projection. They were casual explanations, and no evidence about how religious beliefs evolve. They erroneously attributed the origin of religion to errors of judgment and faulty reasoning. Their observations were inadequate inferences, faulty and conclusion wrong.

KEY PSYCHOLOGICAL ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF AFRICAN INDIGENOUS RELIGION

African Indigenous Religion or African Religion as the name implies is the religion that came as a result of African experience of the universe in which they live. The supernatural revealed himself and the Africans embraced divine wisdom which is expressed and permeates all spheres of their existence. According to Femi (2001) archaeological studies have revealed that African religion is the oldest

religion in the world and its scriptures precede those of all other religions of the world. He further maintained that there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the Christian scriptures borrowed from the ancient Egyptian sacred texts.

There are many approaches to the study of African Indigenous religions. Shorter (1975:58) has a catalogue of the different approaches to the study of African Indigenous Religion (AIR) which has been adopted by different writers. They include African particularist Approach, Enumerative Approach, Hypothesis of unity approach, Historical approach, Limited comparative approach, and multi-dimensional approach. Shorter offered a critique of the different approaches and recommends multi- Dimensional approach. Turner (1981: 1) subjected Shorter's approaches listed above to a critical scrutiny as more of anthropological study than African Religion. He brilliantly argued that religion is a human activity and experience that is interwoven with all aspects of human life. its study would require all the human sciences. He recommended polymethodical which is an approach that will take care of all the dimensions of human life. He equally recognize other approaches that will take care of this distinctive nature of religion are necessary, we have to study religion in its total milieu, that milieu itself, and what it is that is interwoven with all the other dimensions of existence. From this stand point the distinctive disciplines of phenomenology and history of religions are recommended.

Metuh (1983:77) argued that African Religion can be studied from different viewpoints or perspectives

One could study African Religion within one ethnic group; within a geographical region, or in the whole of Africa. One could also, study African Religion from the sociological anthropological, phenomenological or even theological points of view...The study of the traditional religion of only one ethnic group would not require identical approach as the study which embraces a whole region or the whole continent.

It is obvious that the nature of study determines the methodology to be adopted. Multi- Dimensional and polymethodical are good approaches depending on the nature and scope of the study. We have to realize that it is better to study African Indigenous religion from different perspectives to avoid biting more than one can chew. The different approaches or perspectives put together will give a wholistic view of the subject matter. By analyzing AIR in only one of its dimension and that other dimensions have to be analyzed by other types of discipline using different techniques is highly necessary. However, there is interdependence and interrelatedness in scholarly work of one area benefiting from the other, in building its study

Of all the methodologies or perspectives recommended for the study of AIR by both the pioneer and modern scholars, the psychological approach to the study of AIR is neglected. It is the contention of this paper that the psychological

approach to the study of African indigenous religion that will uncover the distinctive religious element of the Africans. Religion is an aspect of human behavior and subject of psychological research. To explore timeless patterns, or types of religious experience. This can be done in the thought and behavior of actually existing persons.

Psychological approach to the study of AIR can be very useful and informative in some of the key issues e.g. how religion originates in individual human development, the .origin of religious concepts, core religious beliefs, and universality of African religious experiences. Cognitive developmental psychology will be useful here. Conceptual development from childhood to adulthood. To examine separately the spontaneous or natural component of religious thought and experience. Psychology can contribute to a better understanding of why people abandon religion beliefs or replace with alternative beliefs. What causes changes in beliefs at all stages in individual development? The study of AIR cannot advance without a contribution of psychology simply because psychological questions are different from those asked in other approaches. E.g. why religious beliefs and practices are both similar and different across Africa? Whether anything in human nature can account for those similarities, what experiences differentiate prayer from worship? Psychological explanations deal with the more basic units of religious phenomenon –at the level of individual than those addressed by other disciplines of study religion like sociology, anthropology, History philosophy

theology among others. Psychological research can make a positive contribution to AIR by showing how the human psychological constitution underpins religious phenomena.

The nature of African religious experience is a psychological topic. This will shed light on spirit possession, medium, trance, vision, divination, witchcraft, dreams and so on. Modern psychologists e.g. experimental should design methods that will allow the objective study of mental states of these indigenous religious phenomena. The study of well- defined religious groups is relevant to psychology especially social psychology. Psychological analysis and interpretation is also required in the study of some obnoxious practices like female genital mutilation, sorcery, ritual killings, secret societies and others that are common currency in most African Societies like Nigeria.

In Nigeria, just like other African countries there is a way in which religion sustains people as a supporting psychology, a form of psychotherapy as God is conceived of as a humane and considerable God. Each of the world's religion in a distinctive way has conferred a sacred meaning upon the circumstances of people existence. Religion be it Indigenous, Islamic, or Christian provides peace of mind, promises prosperity, and successes in life as well as effective human relations. It is thus a source of happiness and success in the world.

CONCLUSION

I wish to remind psychologists that your study of human behavior would be incomplete without the religious behavior of man which permeates every aspect of individual and societal life. Time is ripe for psychologists and religious scholars to shed off long held misconceptions which in the past hindered meaningful interactions and collaborative studies. This calls for unique principles and methods for meaning research that will be beneficial to all.

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