

KOFI ASARE OPOKU, WEST AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION, 1978  
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West African Traditional Religion is a brief introduction to the student of African religion. As all books on African religions go, it does not break new ground. Beginning by clearing up certain misconceptions and fallacies about African religion, the book goes on to identify and explain certain African well known beliefs and practices about the relationship between man and the supernatural which are common, if not to all ethnic cultures in the sub-region, at least, to many of the major ones. Of particular interest are the following fiduciary tenets and key concepts which the writer touches upon in the seven chapters of the book:

- (a) The existence of a Supreme Being, the source of creation, who is credited in various epithets with being the all-knowing, all-powerful master, father and friend, with reference to whom everything finds justification.
- (b) The existence of a plethora of spirit beings or 'divinities' with specialized moral and practical functions satisfying man's natural needs.
- (c) The idea that human beings in their individuality possess identifiable qualities of 'divinity' and realize on earth pre-ordained roles in fulfilment of divine mission.
- (d) The notion that society, seen in flux, derives its internal strength through maintaining its links with the dead, enhances its collective spirituality through the moral lives of its living members, and preserves its internal bonds through social rules and norms for and in the yet-unborn.
- (e) And supporting these beliefs, "religious praxis" that places great emphasis on collective and participatory rituals as the source of succour to the individual.

African religion, as the writer points out, has an internal vitality, continuity, and resilience; and ethnic cultures, as well as many modern social practices are shot through and through with the religious beliefs of the people. In the transitional rites, which the book treats at length, the community expresses its spiritual obligation to each person as it assists each individual, already

sacred at birth, to pass through life as a being becoming more sacred, at each critical phase of his or her physical and moral development, till death comes as a culminating point bringing the "apotheosis" of each person as an ancestor. The living see the dead as achieving the status worthy of reverential regard, and this is what man in Africa lives for. West Africans have subsumed many of these observances into both Islamic and Christian practices.

Yet, while going to great lengths to demonstrate the practicality of West African religions in the daily and secular or non-religious concerns of everyday life (for, indeed, the differences between the religious and the secular obtains in West African as in other cultures), the book nevertheless fails to point out or lay emphasis on the social and psychological mood or attitude which belief in West African religion evokes towards the vicissitudes of life. I refer here to that mood or attitude of "joy in living" so characteristic of the West African and which in the condition of slavery fortified the African with the will to survive, and created the Negro-Spirituals. It is this mood of joy, provident in times of dire need and suffering and pain, which attracts the African to the bosom of his culture and to his traditional religion whenever dark clouds gather. This mood of joy removes the sting of death: the dead are mourned with sorrow not unmixed with joy, and their exit from human life is accepted with an attitude of hope and fortitude. The spirits of the dead come back and continually feed the springs of life ensuring that life is worth living in spite of its pains.

It is this mood of joy which constitutes the creative fount in African culture, enriching society with song, dance and new ritual drama and urging the intellectual search for meaning, philosophical insight, and the discovery of practical solutions to man's anxious queries about the human condition. African religion is an important source of traditional knowledge especially on the human physical and mental condition, and traditional medicine and therapeutics are practised under its umbrella.

An aspect of this religious mood of joy is that West African religion is typically not ASCETIC. Self-denial, sexual abstinence, and abstinence from certain foods are occasionally practised as part of funeral or puberty rites; but they are scarcely seen as a mode of gaining greater spiritual gifts or qualities, except, as the book points out, as part of the regimen for the training of traditional priests in certain cultures. In fact in many West African societies religious abstinence or asceticism might be considered no more a virtue than voluptuousness in expression of religious fervour vice.

Another aspect of traditional religion which calls for some analysis in an introduction on West African religions is the pattern of ritual action of the devotional and supplicatory type. There are fascinating dramatic elements in such ritual enactments which have, in recent times, attracted some attention from some students of African drama. But the distinctly religious elements in the drama of African worship calls for cross-cultural comparison and analysis if we are to capture in practical forms of expression the common elements in the African's relation to the divine. Some brief descriptions of a few forms of worship should have found some place in the book.

In this connection the trance possession phenomenon should have received more than passing references in the book; for the wide distribution of the phenomenon in the sub-region, as a religious phenomenon and also as an accepted channel of spontaneous and induced communication between spirit beings and man (as a means of knowing what is hidden and giving divinity a practical presence which enhances the bond between men and the supernatural) should excite in-depth comparative studies.

In contrast to trans-substantiation which is the core of Catholic devotion, and trans-figuration which is typical of some other religions, one might describe the trance, with apology, as a 'trans-personification' of deities, in the sense that it is a condition in

which deities reveal their powers, personality traits and social significance (through 'capturing' a human person and altering some of his personal characteristics - voice, looks, and manner of walking etc.) for society to receive them and pay them homage as perceptible persons. In the book the trance is mentioned only as a means of receiving a call to the priesthood; it is not treated as a union between divinity and humanity, nor as an important element in ritual worship.

The writer clearly points out that, in terms of religion, West African cultures had an open system. New gods were often added and old ones often 'de-ritualized' as they lost their creative and functional energy, which was often apparent in the failure of a deity to select a priest for his rituals or to manifest itself through the trance phenomenon.

When a new god entered a society, new cultural and social practices made their appearance with the establishment of new cult groups. The impact of Tigari and Koofiri cults in parts of the Akan areas of Ghana is the most recent example of this phenomenon. Such new cults could cause considerable changes in social mobility patterns. And this is why traditional cults are important to the understanding of the social impact of the gods. Failure to elaborate on cult organization is obviously one of the major gaps in the book.

Almost invariably, every new god while modifying its host society also often adapts to the host. One sees one example of this phenomenon in the origins of Shango, the Yoruba deity of thunder. Though Shango was originally evil it took on the attributes of another deity to become one of the greatest deities of Yorubaland:

"the high moral attributes given to Shango originally belonged to an ancient Yoruba solar divinity, Jakuta (which means 'One who fights with stones' or 'One who hurls stones'), to whom thunder and lightning were attributed, and from whom the prohibitions against stealing, falsehood and poisoning originated. Jakuta's attributes were, in the course of time, taken over by Shango, who now represents, to the Yoruba, the wrath of Olorun (God) ---

a role which was played by Jakuta in the past.....

"The "Take over", however, has not been complete, for the priests of Shango still observe the sacred day of Jakuta in Oyo, although the rituals are performed as part of the worship of Shang." pp. 69, 70.

This process of the enculturation of a new god is not unique to African religions. The enculturation of the revealed God of the Jews in Europe followed broadly the same pattern.

As a book for beginners, West African Traditional Religion will find a place on the shelves of many scholars of religion, for a synoptic view of African religions and on the correct attitude to adopt towards the study of African religion. For that reason alone care should have been taken to avoid certain exaggerations bordering on very serious errors. Thus the writer goes too far to the other end when he says:

"There is thus a continent - wide uniformity of ideas in traditional religion in Africa, but this must not be seen in terms of uniformity imposed through proselytizing, force or crusades; it must be seen in terms of common ideas and practices pursued by many African peoples." (pp. 69, 70)

I think any attempt to submerge the striking differences in religious practices on the continent robs Africa of the richness of her culture.

Elsewhere also the writer says of Akan society:

"There are, however, patrilineal clans in which membership is derived from the male line." (p. 99)

The statement per se is tautological; but correctly understood to mean Akans have patrilineal clans, it is incorrect or at least debatable.