

**A REVIEW OF IKECHUKWU ANTHONY KANU'S BOOK: *A HERMENEUTIC APPROACH TO AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION, THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY***

**BY**

***Ejikemeuwa J. O. Ndubisi, PhD***  
***Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies,***  
***Tansian University, Umunya,***  
***Anambra State, Nigeria.***  
***ejikon4u@yahoo.com***

**Introduction**

*A Hermeneutic Approach to African Traditional Religion, Theology and Philosophy* is a resource book written by an Augustinian priest and academic, Rev. Fr. Dr. Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu. The book of 498 pages is comprised of 30 chapters. It was published in 2015 in Jos, Nigeria by Augustinian Publications. This book is an attempt by a contemporary African scholar to unravel the nature, structure, basic beliefs and future of African Traditional Religion in particular, and by extension, African Theology and Philosophy. The author's approach to the critical issues discussed is very simple and direct. Kanu, in this book, manifested his profound knowledge of African Traditional Religion (ATR). He reveals that ATR is not just a religion but also a way of life for the traditional African people.

**Discussion of the Chapters**

The problem of defining African Traditional Religion is the focus of the first chapter of this book. One fundamental question quickly comes to mind here: Are we to talk of African Traditional Religion or African Traditional Religions? Considering the multi-diversity and plurality of African cultures and their different religious beliefs/practices, gravitating towards the second option proves to be more reasonable and acceptable. In other words, if there cannot be a unified and single African culture, there cannot also be a unified and single African Traditional Religion. So, the contention of Njoku (as cited in p. 2) is worth reflecting upon. The African is so notoriously religious (as Mbiti opines) that he may degenerate to being a slave to his religion, albeit indirectly and unconsciously. This largely explains the over-zealous religiosity, pietism and fanaticism of contemporary African Christians and Muslims. Kanu noted that it is obvious that the notion of ATR has been deeply derogated (Pp. 10–15). But a pertinent question remains: was the derogation of our traditional religion(s) only a consequence of Darwinism and racism? Were there not other causative factors? In other words, did Africans themselves not contribute to the derogation of their religion? Could the Westerners have taken away our heritage if we in one way or the other, had not given to them? Were

there not really some practices in ATR that smacked of diabolical, abhorrent, malign, and very dark intentions? Consider the burying of a dead king with a number of maidens and/or young men, the killing of twins, condemnation of people with unknown diseases to rot and die in the evil forests, sacrificing human slaves to idols etc. These practices, though not the bulk and sum of ATR, are arguably intricate practices therein. And they are worth every derogation from a rational mind.

Kanu argued that ATR is not polytheistic, as many popular and conventional thoughts hold (p. 14). The divinities in ATR are merely intermediaries and not Gods. In ATR, there is only one Supreme Being. Also, one might ponder on the relationships between ancestor worship in ATR and veneration of saints in the Christian religion? The Christian might argue that the saint he venerates is not actually 'dead', but alive in heaven and thus closer to God. But the ATR adherent also believes that his dead ancestor is also very much alive and closer to the Supreme Being. If there are conditions that qualify one to become a saint in the Christian religion, there are also criteria that qualify one to become an ancestor in ATR (of which righteousness of life is a major one).

With the statement of Baker (cited on p.28), it became obvious that the author did not take a wrong stance when he posited that the analysis of ATR by western scholars was to a greater extent guided by ignorance and prejudice. The westerners had no real contact with the African people. True, ATR might not have the most laudable beliefs and practices, but to say that Africans had no religion and could not conceive God is nothing but a white lie born out of bias and ignorance. So Kanu, in Chapter Two dwelt on a Historiography of African Traditional Religion. He divided the epochs into four: the pre-colonial period, the colonial era, the post-colonial era and the contemporary era. Kanu noted that many contemporary African scholars have made valuable contributions towards the sustenance of ATR. Again, for the fact that ATR is not only a way of life but also a discipline, it has some approaches. Kanu, in Chapter Three highlighted thirteen approaches to the study of ATR. However, if it is established that human beings are fundamentally spiritual animals and religious beings (*homo religiosus*), and that ATR in particular, cannot be traced to any particular founder or reformers (as expounded on p.9), how efficient or plausible is the historical approach to the study of ATR? What can a historical approach to a religion devoid of a historical founder or any written traditions boast of achieving? This questions call for critical answers. One would also ask if the empirical approach to ATR is feasible, considering the fact that ATR is replete with phenomena that are most often not empirically verifiable (p.49). One would also wonder if ATR has passed the test of philosophical scrutiny and critical analysis. If it has not (as I actually think), the philosophical approach discussed by Kanu (cf. p.50) becomes impracticable.

I must state categorically that the hermeneutic approach proposed in Chapter Four is a very praiseworthy one. This is because of the fact that it goes beyond merely the comparative or phenomenological approach. But there is no gainsaying that many scholars in the field of ATR are either ignorant of, or incompetent in this approach. Therefore, it becomes highly necessary that contemporary scholars of ATR should be well-grounded in the usage of this approach. This is so that they can interpret ATR in the proper manner and context. On the other hand, being unsatisfied with Mbiti's and Koech's models of understanding ATR, Kanu

postulated *Igwebuike* mode in Chapter Five. The concept of *Igwebuike* as a key factor of ATR is very commendable in itself. *Igwebuike*, for Kanu, “speaks of the African sense of communality and complementarity” as the root of understanding African thought (p. 70). However, if the sense of *Igwebuike* was so clearly pronounced in ATR, as argued by Kanu, how comes the concept and practice of the Osu caste system which ostracized a particular group of people? This is a fundamental question that calls for answer. So, having proposed *Igwebuike* model in Chapter Five, Kanu now focused on the Sources of ATR in Chapter Six. He outlined some of the sources of ATR to include African proverbs, folk tales, myths, African names, Artistic expressions of African people, African languages, symbols, songs and prayers. All these invariably go into identifying and manifesting the richness and beauty of ATR. But then, one might wonder what chances of survival there are for ATR in the face of the rapid decline of African indigenous languages (for instance, Igbo language), artistry, symbolism, rituals etc.?

In Chapter Seven, Kanu presents a striking similarity in the cosmologies of ATR and the western religions. This is in terms of anthropocentrism. Both ATR (as depicted in the diagram on p.95) and the major western religions see man as the apex and Centre of the universe. Worthy of praise is the sense of sacredness prevalent in the ATR. This view of life as the *summum bonum* (highest good) could be an efficient panacea to the loss of sense of value for human life which results to legalized abortion, increased homicides, bloody wars etc. More so, the concept of God in African cosmology also drew the attention of our author in this chapter, he further analyzed the attributes of and categories of divinities in African ontology. But contrary to Kanu's position (p.96), that God in ATR is a “personal being with whom one can enter into communion and communication”, popular experiences and opinions have shown that God in ATR is hardly so immanent. Rather, especially in Igbo traditional religion, God is a very transcendent Being with whom one communicates only through intermediaries. That is why in ATR the Supreme Deity does not have any shrine of worship and virtually no objects are dedicated directly to him. Kanu went further to examine the institution of priesthood in traditional African society. This occupied his attention in Chapter Eight. Citing Ebosele (2006), Kanu observed that the call to priesthood in the traditional society can take many forms, namely, apprenticeship, heredity, extraordinary signs and also the age of the individual in question. It is important to note that priests in the traditional African society perform not only the religious functions but also social, economic and political functions. African people really appreciate the presence of priests since they also serve as intermediaries between the people and the Supreme Deity. It is important to note that the call to the priesthood through apprenticeship etc., installation and functions of the ATR priest are similar to what is obtainable for the priests of the Roman Catholic Church.

In Chapter Nine, Kanu presents African Traditional medicine and medical practitioners in a very positive light. It almost seems that African medicine is only a therapeutic and benign practice. But nothing substantial is said about 'evil medicine' and evil medical practitioners (*ajo dibia*), which are also realities in ATR. Following from chapter nine, Kanu now focused on Divination and Diviners in Chapter Ten. He observed that for the African, life is full of mystery; hence the need for divination. He further outlined different forms of divination, namely, Hydromancy, Mirror Gazing, throwing dice, Animal entrails, reading the palm, mediums and seers (Pp. 150 151). Kanu rightly pointed out that divination still has its vestiges even among Christians

(who, more or less, have repudiated ATR). This goes a long way to portray that the way of thinking of the typical African still has deep roots in ATR even in our contemporary society. The African man wants to know the efficient cause of every event and happenstance. He searches for answers everywhere and whether he finds them in the shrine or in the church is of less consequence. The African, irrespective of his/her religious affiliation, MUST be African, that is, seeking for cause of every effect in the universe.

In discussing Chapter Eleven, Kanu sees kings in traditional African society as the manifestation of the kingship of God among the people. In Traditional African Society, kings are not just political leaders but also religious leaders (p. 153). Kings were deeply respected in the traditional African Society. However, Kanu lamented that there is a dwindling show of disrespect of traditional rulers in our contemporary African society. There is need for proper restructuring of the institution of kingship in the contemporary African society. On the other hand, the Chapter Twelve of this book is titled *Marriage in Igbo-African Traditional Society*. Kanu focused his discussion on Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria. Igbo people lay much emphasis on marriage. This is because of the belief that “through marriage the departed are in effect reborn in the children of the family” (p. 164). One cannot but appreciate the beauty, dignity and honor attached to marriage in the African setting, vis-a-vis the chaotic institution found in the western tradition in the name of marriage. What is more? The very rigorous and painstaking processes of marriage (before, during and after) in the African culture make it a very serious affair that one must engage in with adequate wisdom and every sense of maturity. Thus, once marriage is sealed, it goes with strict permanence: divorce or any form of separation becomes almost a taboo. Of course, marital infidelity is an issue of zero tolerance. This is in contrast with the western culture where marriage is almost a child's play. Any couple can always decide to get married anytime they want without going through any processes. The consequences are vividly clear the exponential rate of divorces and marital infidelity in our contemporary society is quite perturbing.

It must be stated without equivocation that the issue of rites of passage means a lot for the traditional African. Kanu, in Chapter Thirteen, enumerated some African rites of passage, namely, pregnancy rites, birth rites, puberty rites, marriage rites and also burial and funeral rites. These rites portray a kind of transition from one phase of life to another phase. One may discover that the African initiation rites, with all the seclusions and preparations, bear a close resemblance to the Christian rites and sacraments. But sadly enough, Kanu lamented that many African societies no longer practice these rites because western education has taken over the education that these rites provide (p. 172). And worse still, these rites have been termed devilish and uncivilized by the Christian missionaries, who were both ignorant of these very rites and the meaning they portray. Since such knowledge is being lost, Africans, in my opinion, may need to reassert the relevance of these initiation rites and thus regain their roots. In Chapter Fourteen, Kanu presents a very beautiful and appreciable view of the rich African symbolism. Though he may be incontestably right, one may wonder the chances of the preservation and continued appreciation of these important traditional symbols in the face of the invasion of western religions and their symbols. How can these African traditional symbols be harnessed and preserved so that they can serve the very important purposes as highlighted in this chapter? (Pp. 183 184). This is a question that Kanu may have to tackle.

The significance and enormous importance of masquerades to African Traditional Society cannot be over-emphasized. This is the focus of Kanu in the Chapter Fifteen of this book. Masquerade is one of the ways the ancestors visit human beings. Kanu's discussion on the characteristics and importance of masquerades in African ontology is very interesting. But the question that readily comes to mind is: Is it really the case, as the author has made it seem, that all masquerades in African Traditional Society are benevolent and innocuous? One of the major characteristics of masquerades is that they wield enormous supernatural powers (p. 192). And whenever there is possession of any kind of power, there is the possibility of either a positive or negative exercise of that power. Thus, it is a necessary and logical implication that there must be some masquerades who exercise their supernatural powers in an evil way. How does Kanu account for such malignant masquerades? On the other hand, the Igbo-African concept of evil and human suffering is, like many other worldviews, very impressive. But like most (if not all) other worldviews, it is very deficient and inadequate in its explanation. For example, in Chapter Sixteen, the myth narrated implies the withdrawal of God in annoyance into heaven as the cause of evil (p. 203). This is very questionable. In the first place, it smacks of a distant God who is indifferent to men's affairs, *Deus otiosus*. This concept of God, as explained in the earlier chapters of this book (and as many scholars of ATR would agree), is foreign to the African understanding of God. The unsatisfactory nature of the explanation of the concept of evil is more clearly seen on page 205 of the book. According to Kanu, "suffering is retributive and proportionate to the abomination committed". Now, how does this explain the suffering of little infants who may not have committed any actual abominations? Also, if "suffering is perpetrated by bad spirits", why does the all-good Chukwu (God) allow *ndi ajo mmuo* (*evil spirits*) to cause evil in the world He created? Also, if the displeasure of powers above man because of human offence explains natural evil, what explains the origin of moral evil in the world that is "ontologically good" (p.207)? Also, according to the human destiny perspective (p. 209), if personal deities (*Chi*) are directly or indirectly responsible for human suffering, then not only is man's freedom undermined; but also God is also indirectly implicated, since the *chi* themselves come from Him.

Chapter Seventeen is on the phenomenon of death in African perspective. Kanu's discussion on the origin and classification of death is an interesting part of the book. Death, for the African people, is not the end of life it is an opportunity for one to enter into another phase of existence. Hence, the need for proper burial and funeral rites (pp. 226 229). However, one wonders if the elaborate burial and/or funeral processes in Igboland have not been more or less completely overtaken by the Christian burial rites. What are the chances of the resuscitation or survival of the traditional burial and funeral rites? More so, if the Igbo tradition holds that *ife Chukwu amaghi adighi eme* (what God is not aware of does not happen) whence comes the concept of premature death (*onwu ike*)? What makes it premature if God always knew about it? Or did it take God unawares? Furthermore, one cannot but appreciate the goodness and relevance of the spirit of kinship in Africa, as discussed in Chapter Eighteen. African sense of kinship brings about development: social, political, economic and moral (Pp. 240 242). But how can Africans sustain this wonderful spirit in the face of the serious threat of western capitalism and individualism, with its foreign political and legal systems that are devoid of all sense of close confraternity, solidarity and accommodation?

The concept of life in African ontology is the concern of Chapter Nineteen. The African sees life as the highest good and this is made manifest in several Igbo names such as Ndubisi (Life is first), Ndukaku (Life is greater than wealth), etc. While reflecting on this chapter, one would realize that an emphasis on this hallowed African traditional view of life would serve as a panacea to the Western view which gives room for abortion, euthanasia and the likes. In Chapter Twenty, Kanu presents a discussion on the concept of re-incarnation in African ontology. He sees African understanding of re-incarnation as a partial one. For him, “what the African understands as re-incarnation is not the return of the soul from the spirit world into the body of another person in the world. It is rather the inheritance of ancestral characteristics” (p. 263). The question raised on page 266 about the African concept of reincarnation is very crucial and needs an urgent and critical answer. This is so as to determine the validity of such an important and significant belief in African ontology. In short, the question goes thus: If what Africans understand as reincarnation is only a transmission of certain trait of the ancestor, is it not explainable by the science of genetic transmission and hereditary transfer? Are the concepts of reincarnation, ogbanje and other related phenomena not merely unfortunate products of the Africans' poor knowledge of the physical and human sciences?

In Chapter Twenty-one, Kanu examined witchcraft, sorcery and magic. Citing Okpalike (2012), Kanu noted that witchcraft consists in magic, sorcery, augury, divination, necromancy, fortune-telling, clairvoyance, etc. Kanu presents witchcraft in Africa as a practice that is entirely and by its very nature evil. How then does one explain 'white magic' which is believed to be used for good and beneficial purposes? Also the distinction between magic and religion (p. 274) is of utmost relevance. This is because such distinction would also apply between magic and miracle. Nowadays in the religious circles, especially in the Christian setting, magic and miracle are confused. People should be made to understand that the tendency to manipulate the Supreme Being and his powers rather than humble supplication is seeking magic and not miracle. Taking a look on sacrifice in ATR in Chapter Twenty-two, Kanu sees African concept of sacrifice from the viewpoints of Mbiti (1969), Okpalike (2008) and Dopamu (1979). In the view of Mbiti, sacrifice is “a means of restoring ontological balance between men and deity.” African people use different gifts to offer sacrifice, namely, kolanut, yam, cocoyam, fruits, goat, dog, cow, sheep, etc. Kanu also highlighted on the different types of sacrifice (Pp. 279 291). One important thing to note is that sacrifice is at the heart of ATR. The issue of taboo is the concern of Chapter Twenty-three. Taboo has to do with religious or social prohibitions. For Eyisi (2006 as cited in Kanu, p. 284), taboo is referred to “actions or behaviours that are in disagreement with culture, tradition or belief of a people or the community.” Kanu went further to outline some taboos in the traditional African society which include incest, adultery, murder, suicide, among others. The position of Kanu on page 287 is worth appreciating. Taboos, when they were held seriously in the African culture, were a symbol of order and control in the community. But the advent of Christianity and western education has robbed us of the sense of taboo. Consequently, every type of evil has become permissible; self-indulgence and evil reign supreme. What taboos previously protected, have been exposed to all kinds of nefarious violations. No thanks to foreign religions. It is also good to note that it is not only the western religions that observe sacred days: ATR also has its own sacred days. So, the reality of sacredness of some days, trees and animals is Kanu's

focus in Chapter Twenty-four. The sacred days in the ATR seem to be more hallowed in the sense that while some of the sacred days in the western religions seem to be commanded by human authority, the sacred days (for example, the Igbo culture) are believed to be divinely instituted. Also, the Euthyphro dilemma that confronts western religions also seems to hold sway in ATR. This dialogue, as seen in one of Plato's Dialogues called Euthyphro states thus: are things holy because God commands them or does God command them because they are holy? In ATR one can ask: Are some trees and animals sacred because divinities dwell in them or do divinities dwell in them because they are sacred? The implications are far-reaching. If they are sacred because divinities dwell in them, why do the divinities choose to dwell in some trees and animals and not others? Again, if divinities dwell in them because they are sacred, it means that they are sacred in themselves, independent of the divinities that dwell in them.

The richness and depth of meaning of African proverbs, as discussed in Chapter Twenty-five, points to the profundity of the philosophical wisdom and insight of the Africans. This is contrary to the western misconception that the Africans are a people with no history of philosophical thought. It is important to note that Africans expressed and continue to express the depth of their philosophical insight through proverbs and other such oral sagacious sayings. Titled *The Dimensions of African Christology*, the Twenty-sixth chapter examines some Christological models in Igbo-African ontology. Christ is seen as the healer, king, ancestor, victor, life-giver, intercessor, and chi. However, this chapter evokes the crucial but unanswered question: In the face of the rapid Christianisation of the African continent, how will Christ and his message be presented to the African person, in such a way that he or she would understand and appreciate Jesus within the context that he or she is at home with? How can Christ's message be brought into the African context? In abandoning ATR for Christianity, how shall we appropriate the foreign religion so as to avoid religious syncretism? Nevertheless, one has to appreciate the Igbo Christology as an experienced-based Christology. This means that for the Igbos, religion is nearer and more meaningful to the individual, and not just the theoretical and intellectual Christianity prevalent in the West, which is devoid of personal experience. In all, it is pertinent that the African people be made to understand Christ in such a way that it fits into their socio-cultural background and historical context. Only through such a way can Christianity be more appreciated and assimilated by the African people.

A very fascinating part of this book is Chapter Twenty-seven that centered on African Inculturation Theology. Kanu is of the opinion that “for the realization of an intensive evangelization in Africa, there is need for inculturation” (p. 344). Inculturation as viewed from different scholars cited by Kanu can be seen as the act of making the message of Christ meaningful to every culture. This means the practical evangelization in the context of the culture of the people without undermining the core message of Christ. One important thing to note is that the improper inculturation and disparity of worldviews have made Christianity in Africa very shallow and superficial. If proper inculturation is the way out, how should this inculturation be most efficiently and properly carried out? How can those factors hindering or slowing down inculturation be taken care of? These questions are calling for objective answers.

Kanu, in Chapter Twenty-eight has made it vividly clear that development in Africa cannot be carried out

independent of religion, since as Mbiti observed, the African is notoriously religious. Religion is a serious factor for an authentic development in Africa. In other words, we cannot do without that which is inherent in us. Moreso, good qualities like a keen sense of morality, value of life, patriotism, unity and African symbols can go a long way to enhance national development (Pp. 380 384). Nevertheless, as Kanu rightly pointed out, not everything in ATR is so benign and benevolent. But one may ask, which one is more practicable and reasonable: To carry out our national development with the foreign religions which are practically the dominant religions in the present Africa; or to attempt going back to our traditional roots of ATR which from every evidence, is almost impossible or at least, anachronistic? In Chapter Twenty-nine, Kanu observed that African cultural values have been greatly de-Africanized and hence the need for revival of that that makes us Africans. The urgent call for African cultural revaluation and renaissance, and the need for obliteration of cultural hegemony is the thrust of this chapter. But on a more practical ground, have we not enjoyed too much of westernization and Christianization to wriggle ourselves free from them successfully? Are we not too much in their debt? From where shall we begin to struggle for cultural emancipation? Religion? Politics? Economics? Language? Science and technology? Again, what is the use of an African philosophy or African theology that are still studied in western languages and with western methods? How truly 'African' are our African philosophy and theology? How can an African be truly African in our contemporary society? Is the call for African cultural renaissance not just for intellectual and academic purposes? Can we / should we go back entirely and radically to the African traditional way of life? Or is it not better to keep manipulating the already predominant western culture to our own context? I think one needs to be pragmatic and sincere as one attempts to answer the above questions.

In the last chapter (Chapter Thirty), Kanu tries to examine some factors militating against the future of ATR both as a discipline and a way of life. Some people have argued that ATR will phase away some day. This is because of the influence of westernization, foreign religions, globalization, urbanization and industrialization, among others (Pp. 403 404). But be that as it may, Kanu is very optimistic that the future of ATR is very bright. He argues that ATR cannot die and will not die. Africans, irrespective of foreign religious affiliations, are still attached to their indigenous beliefs. Kanu also argues that some indices of Pentecostalism in our contemporary society indicate a re-packaging of ATR (Pp. 406 408). This is manifested on the over-emphasis of the powers of the occult and paranormals as are observable in ATR. Furthermore, ATR is being studied today in many higher institutions in Africa and outside Africa. Very interesting to note is the establishment of the International Bio-Research Institute in 2012 (An African Traditional Medicine Teaching Hospital, Ugwuogo Nike, Enugu, Nigeria). The fact remains that ATR as a discipline will continue to exist. But the actual practice of ATR in our contemporary society is seriously on the decrease. The truth is that most ATR scholars do not actually practice the religion. Hence, it is seen as a mere intellectual activity that has no real practical relevance.



## **Concluding Remarks**

It is quite clear from our discussion so far that Kanu actually did justice to the title of this book: *A Hermeneutic Approach to African Traditional Religion, Theology and Philosophy*. The selected topics attest to this claim. Kanu, a contemporary African philosopher cum theologian, manifested his deep sense of 'African-ness' in this wonderful piece. This is a case of one doing what he knows how to do best. The arrangement of and general presentation of this book is a gentle call for orientation (for those who are ignorant of ATR) and re-orientation (for those who are biased or ill-informed about Africa). This book is a veritable tool for students, lecturers and all those who would like to develop their knowledge and understanding about the important issues in African Traditional Religion in particular, and African Theology and Philosophy in general. Kanu has helped to correct some erroneous beliefs about ATR and also affirmed the reality of African Traditional Religion, Theology and Philosophy.

However, I would beg to disagree with the conclusion of this book. From all indications and considerations, I do not think that there has been a meaningful practical revival of ATR in Africa. Rather, the reverse is the case. With the great evangelical zeal of the Christians, and the 'jihadic' spirit of the Muslims, Africa is fast becoming the abode of these foreign religions. In a very pragmatic term, ATR is rather on the decline as many more Africans are quickly abandoning their shrines for churches and mosques. It is true that we still retain the moral values of the ATR, but moral values alone do not make a religion. The core beliefs and practices of ATR in Africa are fast dwindling. More so, it is undeniable the fact that great works have been done in propagating ATR in terms of studying it and making academic researches on it as part of the academic curriculum in schools, colleges, universities and research institutes; but all these advancements are only academic. One wonders if they would be of any help in the practical appreciation of ATR. The fundamental question to be answered by Kanu and most contemporary ATR scholars is: Can the academic study of ATR make us retrace our steps and go back to practicing our traditional religion?