

BOOK REVIEW II

NAME OF BOOK: A Hermeneutic Approach to African Traditional Religion, Theology and Philosophy

YEAR OF PUBLICATION: 2015

PUBLISHERS: Fab Anieh Publications

AUTHOR: Kanu, Ikechukwu Anthony, O.S.A., Ph.D

REVIEWER: Alalama Valentine Emeka (St. Augustine's Major Seminary, Jos)

Introduction

Right from creation man is made up of both a spirit and a body which both has its own longings needs. In man is a vacuum that earnestly yearns for a supreme being and from his quest nothing material or physical could satisfy or fill this all important space in him. He however devised a medium through which he addresses such issues. Through it he gets hold of the divine, he gets access to certain spiritual insights and then settles his needs. This medium is therefore is called 'Religion'. Religion as a general phenomenon is something that is practiced everywhere even in the remotest regions. This therefore implies that in the African world too, religion is in vogue and it is known as African Traditional Religion. Every religion places its edifice on a particular culture and people. Thus the African religion stems its existence in the traditions, norms and customs of the African people. At this point, this work would attempt to do a review of the work on schedule.

A Cursory Glance on the Piece

The problem of defining African traditional Religion, posed a contestable atmosphere, and just as philosophy which has no holistic - depleted definition, African Traditional Religion finds itself in such situation. Thus there is no generally accepted definition to this concept. The nature, elements and the indoctrinated views of this concept were also addressed. African, Tradition, and Religion are its three elements. It has no founder, it is spontaneous, and a reflection of the people. It is never a primitive enterprise, paganism, fetishism, etc. The author went further, by giving a developmental unfolding of events of African Traditional Religion through the passage of time. He emphatically gave the four eras that relates its history: pre-colonial, colonial, post - colonial and contemporary seasons. Paging through chapters three, four and five, the author underscored certain approaches which were employed in the study of African Traditional Religion; ranging from the historical to the hermeneutic approaches. All these in so many different ways gave descriptive

and specific interpretations to this discourse. It would interest one to observe that he remarked on the concepts of time and myths by John Mbiti and Kimgeno Keech respectively, which attempt to reach at an understanding of ATR; these according to him were believed insufficient and less effective in doing so. However he went further to propose a modality. This stand which he established, he called 'Igwubuike'. In it one would see the undiluted form of communality; this according to him is the key that unlocks the mystery in understanding ATR. The chapter six laid emphasis on the source of ATR. These are the raw materials, the fibers that make up the linen of ATR. Among such are: African proverbs, folk tales, myths, language, symbols etc. in the realm of the cosmos (universe), the African man as averred by the author, view it solely as it affects him. He stressed on how he perceives, conceive, and understands it. In all, it is an African approach which sees the world as both a physical and spiritual entities fused together. And that God has dominion over the universe and man is the central point of them. The priesthood is held with paramount importance. It is actually an institution like other religions; he serves as a mediator. One can become a priest by apprenticeship, heredity, extraordinary signs etc. he also gave four different procedures on a priest is being installed in conjunction with his functions which are religiously, socially, economically and politically inclined. In the spheres of medicine, divination and diviners which are resultant remedies to sickness, diseases, misfortunes, the African people generally believed that such things are caused by crimes or evil acts performed by a person or group of persons. The diviners try to give solutions and explanations.

Kingship in the African perspective is an office that fills in the gap of God on earth to enforce authority. He is as well a religious leader. Life according to the author is chain of developmental stages; in other words, transition from one stage to another over time. More so, the rites of passage is discovered, holds a crucial standing jus as an African individual himself. It is the movement from one stage of life as one grows up to another through rites of initiations and rituals. Examples are: birth rite, puberty rite, marriage rite etc. looking at marriage from the prism of the Igbo culture which was succinctly expressed by the author: is a lawful union between a man and a woman who exchange consent of love. He enumerated stages that are involved in the marriage plans. It is a community affair and not just a stuff of the two parties. Symbols in themselves reveal certain meanings often other than their intrinsic values. The African symbols reflect, communicate and mirror down the African world and essence. It could be events, objects, gestures etc. Masquerades, in the black world are the visible presence of their ancestors long gone and are symbolized in different forms. They pose inspiring attributes and power and exercise certain functions and boost the economy of the community. Death is expressed as an inevitable phenomenon, and that it is not the end of life but actually a transition into another world. He remarked the source and origin of death and suffering also. Death could be

good, bad or violent. Kinship in the African settings is one which emphasizes bond and communality. People are identified through kinship. It is web like structure that associates individuals. Life is seen as the highest good and given by God. It depicts effectiveness and efficiency. Belongingness is seen as an evidence of the sense of living. And it begins from conception. Man is made up of three elements: body, spirit and soul. Reincarnation is observed unlike the Western concept in the African world view as a partial phenomenon. It is the inheritance of the features of ancestors rather than the return of the spirit from the soul world into another body. Ogbanje or Abiku were distinguished from these concepts which are seen as mischief and bad omen.

Chapter twenty – one stressed on witchcraft, sorcerer and magic. They engage in supernatural activities and manipulations of forces. Witchcraft is socially disapproved; sorcery and magic are seemingly accepted based on a positive influence they could render to the community. He outlined some procedures on how one could be initiated into their cults. The book furthermore buttressed the axiom sacrifice as a means of striking a balance and maintaining the equilibrium between the human world and that of the spirits. That the African man feels he is whatever way might have offended or fallen away and hence needs reconciliation. So sacrifice comes to play to reconcile, to ask for favors. It could be in form of votive, substitutionary, foundation sacrifices. Taboos are abominable acts done by a person or group of persons against existing constitutions. This chapter emphasized that taboos are relative based on community discretions and norms. Also the African people see the adherence of taboo as a way of the community's sustenance otherwise such community would collapse. Examples of such are murder, incest, adultery etc. The sense of sacred is consciously observed by the African people. Sacredness is ascribed to certain objects, animals etc based on the communities' beliefs, and these objects reveal supernatural attributes, examples are market days, the ofo tree, and python. Some objects are also tagged profane, examples are owl, vulture etc. proverbs are seen as the voice of a particular people; a vehicle that conveys messages. Author used the Igbo cultural dimension in addressing it. Proverbs also reflect some philosophical connotations. The African Christology in contrast to the western concept begins from below and ascends above. It is more of a lived experience; hence the African people see Christ lived. It is also based on the power and victory of Christ. ATR is invariably another source of African Christology; their myths, proverbs, parables etc reveal the nature of Christ. He (Christ) is seen as a healer, king, victor, giver of life etc. with the outspread and growth of Christianity in Africa, and for effective and conducive evangelism, the need for inculturation was adopted. Through it, beauty is added to the Christian faith. The author also pointed out some challenges that might emerge through inculturation such as problem of language, skepticism, syncretism etc. ATR has also contributed its quotas to national development, in the aspect of morality, unity, patriotism etc. chapter 29, emphasized on the awakening the African people to

uphold, maintain, protect and live out their cultural heritages and riches. The last chapter tremendously expressed a phobia of ATR going into extinction like other religions because of the powerful factors or agents acting aggressively to it. Among such are modernism, Islam, Christianity, consumerism etc.

Appraisal

Having explored this yet another thought – provoking piece, I came to the realization though suggested in the mind of the author that a people without an origin or more precisely culture or is however like a river without a source. This is not in any way say that such exists, though giving a credence to the benefit of doubt that one maybe caught up with the situation of not tracing his/her root. But in such case it doesn't dispute the fact he/she has an origin in the real sense.

No doubt this piece has immensely addressed and stung indigenous Africans with reference to Nigerians to the consciousness of recognizing and appreciating their own gifted and rich heritage amid alien cultures. So much so that even when tries to disillusion himself/herself about the historical and developmental existence of his/her tradition ends up in total self – contradiction or suicide. This book exposed with much intent so much enigma revolving round most African beliefs and traditions which were taken for granted, misinterpreted and looked at with scorn and disdain. For instance, initially African Traditional Religion was seen as something fetish, idolatrous and all what not, this book rid off and gave a better understanding. Shedding off every tribal sentiment, I subscribe to concept of death: a process of transition to a world beyond. I see it also as the end of an end which begins another end that has no end. This book is clearly a promotion of the African culture and tradition.

Critique

- From all ramifications, the book is less culture – sensitive: there are traces of one – sided syndrome of ethnic worldviews; such that there is on categorical diffusion of other tribes' perspectives on ATR other than the Igbo and perhaps Yoruba perspectives on the subject matter. It lacks the sociological research qualities and enquiry which are not visible in the entire work. At least in some chapters, the Igbo perspectives should be avoided and other ethnic views employed. Though excuses were given, but remember variety is the spice of life.
- Also considering the view held about suffering as explained, I don't assent to it because ascribing suffering to man as something predestined by God clearly shows that man's freedom and freewill are hampered and that God is partial. I feel rather that the missing link is not only the mystery dimension of evil, but

when we (Africans) fail to understand events that happen in a holistic angle and not in a particular way. More so, on this same issue, I suggest that evil could be seen in this light as “a privation or the negation of good”.

- I am not of the opinion with pertinent concern on reincarnation (partial). I perceive it to a genetic trait inheritance. Scientific research has proven that in every one thousand years, there is the possibility that someone with similar traits and genes could be reborn. So the issue of reincarnation is a faded issue. I also see it as a means the African man invent in order to give answer and meaning to troubling questions; hence satisfy their innocent ignorance. I stand to be corrected where needed; reincarnation defies the principle of identity and uniqueness.
- In your discussion on taboos, I discovered that it failed to address specific situation and circumstances beyond one’s control which may cause one to commit them. And in such case when it occurs, how would the rule of law be applied; like in the case of self defense; though little was just said on it at the last sentence of the conclusion section. I feel more should have being emphasized on it, maybe as a sub heading in the work. It would do great good to the work too.
- One essential set back observed is that the voice of the author is really not heard and felt to a large extent in this book. Such situation hinders the readers from getting the intent of the author or the main idea the writer wishes to express on a given text.

Conclusion

I greatly commend the effort dished out to arrive at this serene clincher – ‘IGWUBULKE’. It is unequivocally an encompassing approach and really an undisputable axiom that gives meaningful interpretations and understanding to ATR. It has all the necessarily make ups and authority which really the intrinsic nature of ATR and its practices.

In my own opinion, this work has really done immensely in exposing the nity-crittiness of ATR and it has enlightened me as a person on the paramount nature of African myth, customs, beliefs, norms and the role they play in ATR.

Finally I say to the author “Dalu” for illumining me intellectually with the radiance of a better grasp of the basic rudiments of religion in the African context.