

**A Christian examination of
the Concept and Identity of
the Supreme Being
in African Traditional Religion**

African Traditional Religion Research Paper

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A Christian examination of the Concept and Identity of the Supreme Being in African Traditional Religion

“Is the God of African Traditional Religion (ATR) the same God as that believed by Christians?” So runs the old debate, probably much of the time dominated by John Mbiti’s writings, largely beginning with his 1970 book *Concepts of God in Africa*.¹ Subsequent scholars such as Tokunboh Adeyemo² have been forced to decide to what extent they agree or disagree with Mbiti’s theological analysis, but a strong thread of thought in post-missionary African Christian scholarship maintains that there is such a strong correlation between the attributes of the Supreme Being and the ‘God’ proclaimed by missionaries (from the Bible), that the two are identical. I am concerned that we may have overlooked certain methodological and logical aspects of comparisons between ATR ‘theology’ and Christian theology, and so I wish in this study to examine carefully some of the background issues and problems, including the assumptions that may be brought to this question. Combining this with a study of the general statements made about this matter, semantic issues and evidence from the Bible, we hope to find some clarity in a potentially confusing area.

Confusion, Implications and the Questions Behind the Question

One initial observation stimulated this research: most discourse focuses on the ‘concept’ of God in African and other societies or religious systems, but the Bible goes beyond ‘concepts’ in confronting the world with the personal, relational identity of God. Indeed this may be the chief distinguishing mark which differentiates Christianity from every other theistic religion. Jesus Christ the man born in occupied Israel 2000 years ago was more than a concept, and more even than the embodiment of a concept. So a fully Christian theological engagement with African Traditional Religion, as with Islam or Hinduism, or any theistic or atheistic philosophy must follow the Bible and move beyond concepts (which may derive from either general or special revelation) to deal with Christ (the culmination and most special of special revelation).

When faced with a question such as “Is the God of ATR the same God as that believed by Christians?” it is often useful to probe behind the question to the underlying assumptions and any agenda or hidden questions that may be in the questioner’s mind. This topic is sometimes accompanied with the question “Have Africans been worshipping the same God as Christians?” which begins to reveal something of the background. Anyone asking these questions is usually aware of some of the implications deriving from any particular answer.

This is not purely an academic issue for African Christians or enquirers. At root, an African may want to know what has happened to their ancestors who lived and died before the gospel reached them, and with whom they feel more than just a sentimental attachment, because of the significance of ancestors in African thought. Also, faced with a belief system different from African Traditional Religion, the questioner may be unsure how to relate to his cultural heritage and past; whether it is all to be discarded, or if not, then where is there to be continuity and where discontinuity in terms of belief and behaviour, worldview and relationships. It is also true that some ask the question and seek to identify ATR belief with Christianity in order to avoid the universally humbling challenge of the gospel. If we can say that Africans have been worshipping the One True and Living God through the ages, then at best Christianity may give some fresh ideas for worship, but nothing particularly radical.

If we were able to treat this topic more fully, we would ask about the conception of ‘worship’, ‘sin’ and ‘salvation’ for the questioner. We would need to consider a Christian approach to History, to felt needs and real needs. We need to be aware that there are implications which come from any statement about the identity of God, and that if we are in search of truth and reality, rather than a

1 John S Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*. London: SPCK 1970; New York: Frederick A Praeger

2 Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition* Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House 1979

narcissistic reflection of our own desires and ideas, we need to be on our guard against reasoning being driven by wishful thinking. One particular area of challenge for those coming from a humanist worldview (even a very *religious* but still human-centred worldview as we believe African Traditional Religions appear to offer) is that our ideas of what is fair or reasonable may not reflect truth from God's perspective.

So, aware that it is all too easy to follow logical reasoning even using the Bible as a source, and develop conclusions which are contradicted by the Bible, we need to test not only the axioms and starting-points for reasoning but also the implications, to discern if they are truly Christian. If we conclude that the same God was worshipped by Africans in centuries past as by Jews in Ancient Israel and Christians today, we must be ready to state clearly the legitimate and the illegitimate conclusions and implications deriving from that statement. But in this paper we can only begin to address this issue.

Problems

Several problems make it hard to address this subject clearly. How can we talk about a God who is invisible? How do we know we are thinking the same things? Is it legitimate to talk about African Traditional Religion as a coherent unity, or should we talk about Traditional Religions? What effect has encounter with Christianity and Islam had on African Traditional Religion? How might these 'monotheistic' religions constrain the types of questions asked by inquirers and distort the responses of informants? What are the best questions to ask? And finally, there is a significant question which might easily be overlooked: what do we mean by the verb *is*? (Particularly in the question 'Is the God of the Bible the same God worshipped in ATR?')

Talking about an Invisible God

Talking about God as humans are constrained to describe his actions and use metaphor and possibly anthropomorphism to describe his character and behaviour in relationship with his world. This may be a source of confusion if similar metaphors are used which have different connotations in different societies.

ATR as Unity or Diversity

The question about whether ATR can be considered a coherent unity or not is an enduring one. Probably the best approach is to recognise that many characteristics of traditional belief, worldview and religion across Africa have much in common, but that there is often considerable variation amid the details. We must recognise that in ATR we have no scriptures with which to compare the Christian scriptures, so we must observe common practice and statements of ATR adherents. For the purposes of this study we rely on the varied accounts of ATR given in class and in other writing, dealing in general terms. It would be fruitful as an extension of this research to apply these general observations to specific settings, but again this is beyond the scope of this paper.

External Influence and the Observer's Paradox

Islam and Christianity have been present in various parts of Africa now for centuries and it is clear that even when peoples have not openly embraced them, they have had an impact on worldview and thinking. So it is arguably impossible to determine at all reliably what early, uninfluenced ATR may have believed about the Supreme Being. It is quite possible that in reaction to monotheistic religions which seem to have more of a focus on the Supreme Being, traditional thinking which focussed more on witchcraft³ was forced to discuss the traditional conception of the Supreme Being more than would naturally have been the case. And anthropologists and missionaries coming from

³ For example, there is very little treatment of the Supreme Being in E E Evans-Pritchard *Witchcraft among the Azande*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1937

European monotheistic backgrounds (even if atheistic anthropologists) would have come with certain assumptions about religion and the deity which will naturally have constrained their questions, and thus the answers that were found.

However, while a diachronic study of ATR belief regarding the Supreme Being might be interesting, for practical purposes of understanding how Africans think now, it may not be particularly relevant to enquire what early 'pure' beliefs were. We just need to be aware that the types of questions we ask can skew the responses we receive, so that even asking questions directly about the Supreme Being and his attributes may result in an analysis rather more similar to European systematic theology, than if we merely observed African Traditional culture. The very presence of an observer, however, changes the situation being observed in some way. This is the observer's paradox.

Semantic, Philosophical, Logical and Reasoning Problems

Related to the problems of external influence and the observer's paradox, is the difficulty of finding the right questions to ask. If we ask the wrong questions, the answers we get may be completely unhelpful or meaningless. For example, it may be relatively meaningless to ask what African Traditional Religion says about the person of Jesus Christ, or about the Trinity.

Similarly and very crucially we need to investigate the semantics of questions we ask and statements we take about African Traditional Religion. In particular we need to understand the function (in English and other languages) of the copula verb 'to be'. We will treat this later.

We must also address the issue of what truth is and how different societies establish truth and develop certainty about knowledge. This will help us to understand why people may believe what they do about the Supreme Being. A traditional African approach to understanding is not through scriptures (a Christian approach) or rationalisation (a 'modern' Western approach) but through tradition, community consensus and community experience.

What Some People Have Said & Their Reasoning

There seem to be two general approaches to the question of the concept of God in ATR and Christianity resulting in seemingly opposite interpretations of similar evidence. The common observation is that different people groups around the world use diverse names to speak of the Supreme Being. To this observation, some observe the variety and diversity of concepts and characteristics or personalities embodied in understanding of the Supreme Being and conclude that these different people groups believe somehow in diverse gods. Others observe that despite the diverse names, there is significant conceptual overlap between what different peoples believe about the Supreme Being, at least some general sense. Thus they conclude that actually everyone is talking about the same Being but using different names.

For each broad interpretation—diverse gods, or one God—the perspective of the observer determines exactly how they understand its significance. If an observer concludes that there are diverse gods then there are three general further interpretations. A monotheistic observer will conclude that there is one God and then many groups are enslaved to false gods or impostors or demons. A polytheistic observer will conclude merely that there are many gods in the world and different people worship different gods; none is necessarily particularly Supreme. Finally the kind of modernistic atheistic anthropologists who were particularly active coming from Europe in the last century or so will believe that all these concepts of the Supreme Being are figments of the imagination, or merely convenient social constructs.

However, each of these interpretations face a problem in that there is a certain significant conceptual overlap evident between the diversity of beliefs about the Supreme Being in different cultures. So, many conclude that the same God is being worshipped under different names. For example, Tokunboh Adeyemo criticises Mbiti and Idowu for blurring the distinction between

Christianity and African Traditional Religion, yet is happy to conclude that the same God is worshipped.⁴ Again there are three further interpretations deriving from this general understanding. Exclusivist monotheists may see other people groups worshipping the one true God as an unknown god (one interpretation of Paul's approach in Acts 17). Universalists see the same God relating differently to different people. Again, atheistic anthropologists have tended to see these various understandings as just similar figments of the imagination fulfilling similar social or philosophical needs for differing communities.

Having given several examples from different cultures, this is generally where analysis ends. However, I feel that this is not sufficient. I think we have been superficial if we stop here, and have confused some issues, particularly issues of semantics which we will now consider.

Semantic Clarity

Rôle and Identity

Language about human relationships to God must, of necessity, be similar to that used of other relationships in the world. (A Christian would see that this is because God created humans in his image, so that our relating to each other and to him is an image of his own relationality.) So, generally, we see that people recognise some kind of distinction between rôle and identity. The two are very frequently linked, but rôle (as used in this paper) is more a conceptual category. A rôle is a 'job description', a public or generally-understood manner of someone functioning, relating to events that happen and which are generally experienced by groups of people. In contrast, we use identity here to refer to a relational description. 'Identity' describes the personality and history of a person in relationship with other people.

This relational view of identity may be more an African understanding than an Enlightenment-oriented European view. The key expression of the European Enlightenment was the definition of individual identity by individual thought: "I think, therefore I am". Whereas an African understanding is generally described as "I am because we are" or "We are, therefore I am"—a community and relationship-oriented approach to identity. Since this paper concerns African Traditional Religion this is the definition of identity we use, which should make our understanding clearer.

There can be, thus, a difference between talking about 'The President of Kenya' and 'Mwai Kibaki'. The significance of this will be examined now, considering the copula verb 'to be'.

The Various Functions of 'is'

So then, with the distinction established, we can examine how when talking about people, the English verb 'to be' may be used in different ways, with different significance, depending on whether rôles or identities are involved.

If I say "My father is Keith Rowbory" then I am linking a rôle (father) with a personal identity (Keith Rowbory). Similarly "Mwai Kibaki is the President of Kenya" links rôle and personal identity. This usage takes a known rôle and reveals something of the identity (individual personality, history and other characteristics) of the person occupying the rôle. Here we assume that the name is a way of referring to the identity of a unique person. Anyone would know that I have a father, and that Kenya has a President. However, while they may talk about these rôles and give a list of some concepts about 'father' or 'president', they may not know the identity or relational history of the person filling those rôles.

We can also link two rôles, such as by saying "The President is the Chief Executive of Kenya", "The President is the Commander of the Armed Forces" or "The King of Scotland is the King of

4 Tokunboh Adeyemo, *The Doctrine of God in African Traditional Religion*, PhD Thesis p 1,

England”. In these cases we are doing one of two things. Either we are defining one of the rôles in terms of another, perhaps more easily understood one, or we are stating that the same person is performing both rôles, and we assume that the listener knows the personal identity of one of those rôles. So in the first case, we were really clarifying that in the Kenyan Context “President” means the same as “Chief Executive” irrespective of who the person actually is in that position. In the last example, we may have been talking about the historical anomaly of the union of the crowns in British history where due to relational accident the nearest heir to the English throne was currently ruling as king in Scotland, and so he held both positions concurrently. The countries remained politically independent, but the same personality (King James) ruled both. So if we said that “The King of Scotland is the King of England” and knew that the listener understood the King of Scotland to refer to King James VI, then our listener would learn that he was now King of England.

More unusually we may link two personal identities: “Arthur is George”. Here someone may have been known to one person under one name and a different name to someone else. The statement tells the listener that the person they have related to or known under the name Arthur is the person that the speaker has been relating to under the name George (or vice versa).

Sometimes we might ask “are we talking about the same person?” in an attempt to clarify whether one personal identity known to one speaker is the same person known by the listener. Two different people may sound very similar—indeed identical twins may be very similar physically and ‘conceptually’—but be unique personalities with different relationships and personal history. For any real relationship we are interested in the identity and not merely the concept of the person to whom we are relating.

So our assertion is that the most important question we must address is this type of question of personal identities, if (as Christians) we believe that God is concerned to relate personally with people he has made, and that all humans depend for their eternal security (and their own identity) on that relationship. However, if we talk only about ‘concepts’ of God, we are actually talking only about the rôle of ‘Supreme Being’ without moving further to discuss aspects of that Supreme Being’s personal identity, and history of relationships with people.

Concluding that due to the similarities between concepts of Supreme Being held by different people, that they are talking about the same person, would be a similar fallacy to that of hearing two people talk about their mothers, noticing many similarities and concluding that they must have the same mother. That may be so, or the two women may just be very similar but distinct.

Thus we must move beyond just collecting and comparing concepts of God from Scripture and from African thought. This may provide some helpful and interesting framework for interacting with traditional Africans, but if we are to do any useful study of ‘God’ in African Traditional Religion from a Christian perspective, we must examine and compare the revelation relationships that exist with the Supreme Being. These revelation relationships may be first-hand or from eye-witnesses but concern character, history and personal relationships: both language and action is required!

Biblical Perspectives

One God

From Genesis 1, the Bible is clear that there is only one God, although there are some perplexing hints of plurality or diversity within the unity even from the beginning (Isaiah 45:5 *I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God;*). In terms of God’s rôle, the Bible introduces God as the one who created the whole physical and supernatural universe, who sustains everything, who is self-existent and who is generally revealed to the whole world. In terms of identity Genesis makes it clear that he had several exclusive relationships with specific individuals (Enoch, Noah etc) until he called Abram from false worship to follow him and to begin a period of interacting

with a whole nation. The New Testament shows he has revealed himself ultimately in his Son Jesus Christ from which point the Trinitarian nature of God became clear. The Bible essentially is a history of God's relationships with particular people who enjoyed his direct or indirect special revelation. All special revelation was first for the Jews and then through Christ for God's relationship with all who are adopted into his family, Jew or Gentile.

Impostors

However, while the Bible is clear there is only one God without equal, there are many impostors who enter from early on: one major impostor (the Devil) and many minor ones (other evil spiritual forces, philosophies, and even humans). These impostors may claim God's attributes, characteristics and acts and so deceive or enslave people to honour them as they should honour and relate to the one true God.

Practical Atheism and Polytheism

In addition the Bible knows little of philosophical atheism but much of practical atheism, where "The fool says in his heart 'There is no God'." (Psalm 14:1, Psalm 10:4). Likewise, there is much evidence in the Bible of false worship: abuse of worship in deed (by Jews too) not just in creed, and other apparent polytheism in the Bible where other gods were worshipped. Someone may mentally acknowledge God but there is no real relationship with him and it doesn't really affect your life significantly. There may be very religious behaviour, but that may in fact marginalise God. Amongst the Zande, Ferdinando⁵ sees "no material evidence of worship, a unique myth, one public ceremony performed rarely, stereotyped 'prayers'". So in practical terms, the lesser but more directly experienced powers have more significance than the Supreme Being. This is a kind of practical atheism or practical polytheism.

But what does the Bible say about the other peoples' gods: Dagon, Molech, the Baals and the Ashtoreths? These appear to fill YHWH's rôle but to be comparatively impotent (1 Samuel 5:3) and to have a fairly different character and history in relationship with the people by which they were worshipped.

Alternative Worship

What does the Bible say about other forms of worship? For God's people, unauthorised and self-styled worship frequently led to instant death (for example Leviticus 10:1). However in his grace, ignorant worship (as we see in Acts 17) was overlooked and not taken as an offence; it was just completely powerless and pointless. But with the revelation of Jesus Christ the situation has changed, so that Paul needed to proclaim Christ to the ignorant 'wise' people in Athens.

God's Relationship with All People

We must also ask what relationship people have with God. Clearly the Bible shows that we share a common ancestor Adam. But together with inheriting physical life from him, we inherit spiritual death and alienation from God because of his disobedience. Even if we found someone who had lived a flawless life in God's sight (which never happens!) we can no more dissociate ourselves from that disobedience and its consequences than we can remain alive and dissociate ourselves from the physical life inherited. So not one human deserves anything but a mixture of pain and blessing until physical death, and then complete separation. Thus ATR is right to enshrine a hatred and fear of death: it is in no way good, except for God's initiative. The Bible makes it clear that God himself has taken the initiative to reveal himself to his alienated deputies. He has revealed himself personally yet not individualistically alone. Beginning with Abram he has revealed himself in family terms, so as to bless all families of the earth through Abram's family. Blessing in this sense

5 Keith Ferdinando, *The Triumph of Christ in African Perspective* Carlisle: Pater Noster 2002 p 12

seems to mean relationship with God, and not just the physical benefits of that relationship which we may think of. So since establishing relationships with people, we have a choice to respond in one of two ways: either to come humbly to God, trusting his path for the relationship; or proudly to reject God's call and either ignore God, or to substitute the relationship with another or attempt the relationship on our own terms.

General Revelation, Special Revelation and Truth Suppression

However at this point there is always an objection: What if people have never known the real God? Perhaps they have only ever known the Supreme Being distantly in terms of his generally-obvious rôle as creator and sustainer of the universe. Or perhaps an impostor has been known instead. Unfortunately, as much as wishful thinking might make us desire otherwise, the Bible is quite clear throughout that General revelation outside of scripture is only enough to damn us and leave us uncertain of relationship with the Supreme Being (for example Romans 1-2). Only special revelation—God's personal self-revelation, call and redemption—can bring us into lasting positive relationship with him. But we must also track back to Adam and Eve. They quite clearly knew the true God. So where did the knowledge disappear to if all are descended from Adam? It seems clear (again Romans 1) that since Adam, people have been concealing and suppressing the truth in the hope that it might make the truth go away. However, suppressing truth does not change it if the the Supreme Being himself is the determiner of truth, rather than rationality or community consensus.

Instead, suppressing truth brings real lasting harm to those in subsequent generations. This may seem unfair, but it is unavoidable in a universe which does genuinely have a consistent Supreme Being. It clearly shows our need for God's grace in revelation with so much truth-suppression around. We know that obscuring God's truth does not change it, it only harms those who are misled, just as it would be irresponsible to teach a young child not to fear knives, by saying that if you cut your hand it will not hurt. When the child tries it, they will discover to their harm the fallacy, though the child was sincere in their belief that it would not hurt, and had no way of knowing otherwise.

Conclusions

So, is the Supreme Being of ATR the same as the God of the Bible? We have to answer 'yes' and 'no' since it all depends on the meaning of the word 'is'. Are we talking about the 'job-description' or rôle? Or are we talking in relational terms about the personality or identity of God?

But we must also be suspicious of agendas and questions behind our questions that we may bring to this issue. Wishful thinking may lead to eternally-fatal error either for us or for others. Similarly it will be important to consider whether this distinction between rôle and identity is helpful or is a false dichotomy. We must recognise the limits of making distinctions, and recognise that there is distinct overlap. But we believe that it is helpful especially in an African context to talk relationally as well as conceptually about the Supreme Being.

So in conclusion we would say that in terms of rôle often the concept of Supreme Being in ATR matches closely to the rôle of God in the Bible. We can affirm that there is only one God. In this aspect Africans may be at an advantage compared to European Atheists who have managed to create a philosophical system to suppress the obvious existence of God.

But much more significantly when we consider the personal identity and relational history of the God of the Bible and the Supreme Being of ATR we have to say 'no'. God seems to want all people to know him through Christ who puts a face on God, who makes his identity plain to all peoples and who fulfils God's call to all people to come into responsive relationship with their Maker, a plan that began with Abram. Abram could have been being misled by another impostor spirit, but the history of his and his people's relationship with the one who called him out of Ur shows Abram's God to be the true Living God. So if the Supreme Being's character and personality does not match that attested to by Abraham and ultimately in Christ, then we are deceived and are relating to an

impostor. And if we can't know God (as in practical terms Islam and ATR seems to suggest); if he's remote so that no real relationship is possible, then we have no hope in and beyond this world. But such knowledge of God and relationship with him is available through Christ.

It will always be difficult to admit that our ancestors have died separate from God, deceived and enslaved to an impostor, and spending eternity separate from him but if we are willing to submit our wishful thinking to God's authority we will be able more honestly to look at our history and ancestry—whether European or African—and thank God that he rescued us from being otherwise lost for eternity. And we must make sure that in Christ this knowledge of God is never again suppressed, concealed or lost. And we must keep letting the Bible reform our thinking and worldview, whatever culture we come from.

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