

SIST SYMPOSIUM SERIES

# **GOD, BIBLE** **AND** **AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION**



*Edited by*  
**BEDE UCHE UKWUIJE, C.S.Sp.**



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Mary Sylvia Nwachukwu, DDL

### Abstract

*For a god to be god, it must exhibit or be arrogated certain deity traits. A study of the epic literatures of the peoples of the Ancient Near East reveals the presence of similar linguistic lines in the history of the becoming of their gods. Studies in comparative religion also revealed that ancient histories of religion are developed around similar thought patterns. Ancient peoples of the Near East lived closely as neighbours and shared similar cultures and beliefs. They created similar stories about their different gods and different nations and it is easy to see reciprocal influences in the similar epics they created from their different contexts. Even in spite of its monotheistic character, the Hebrew religion was not able to shake off influences from other cultures. However, the influence is limited to linguistic expression. After an initial exposition of the characteristic deity traits in the epic of ancient peoples, the paper investigates the presence of an epic in Igbo Traditional Religion. It underlines the similarities between the Igbo Traditional religious thought pattern and the Biblical faith.*

### 7.1 Introduction

• The present paper is an attempt to make a theological study of an aspect of African religion<sup>1</sup>. Most books on African religion were written by anthropologists and sociologists. J. Mbiti had noted, "Practically nothing has been produced by theologians, describing or interpreting these religions theologically"<sup>2</sup>. I wish, through this paper, to make a modest contribution to this kind of research. I have been excited by the result of studies done on ancient religions, Mesopotamian and Canaanite, for instance, which give theological interpretations to myths, legends and religious practices in these religions. Such studies have revealed the nature of the relationship between these religions and the Hebrew religion. This symposium, therefore, gives me both the opportunity and inspiration to undertake this research into the relationship between the God of the Bible and African Traditional Religion. Although many difficulties, which will be articulated in the next paragraph, discourage an exhaustive study of such a research for the African religion, the present paper should be understood as only an initial attempt.

<sup>1</sup> Although some authors express their opinion to the contrary, this paper will speak of African religion in the singular.

<sup>2</sup> J. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Oxford: Heinemann, 1999, p.1.



Evidences exist, in the myths and legends of ancient peoples and in the Bible, which expose the traits of the national and supreme divinities of these ancient peoples. Yahweh is the national and supreme God of the Israelites. In the Bible, the phrase, "...so that you will know that I am the Lord", is included to show that there are certain actions by which Yahweh, the national God of Israel, proves his kingship and lordship over the Israelites. These actions were also orchestrated in order to prove Yahweh's supremacy to Pharaoh and the Egyptians. This phrase runs like a refrain in the story of the struggle between Yahweh, the God of Israel and Pharaoh, the king of Egypt (Exod 7:15). It is also found in its varied formulations in Isaiah<sup>3</sup> and Ezekiel<sup>4</sup>. The phrase uses the divine name 'Yahweh' (the Lord) and not 'Elohim' (God), which implies that the case at issue is not the proof of Yahweh's divinity, but his status as King and Lord over Israel. In the books of Isaiah and Ezekiel, the phrase is used to secure Yahweh's kingship and lordship over the nations. In biblical scholarship, this phrase is called the 'acknowledgement formula'. I make reference to this formula at the beginning of this essay because it is the phrase that inspired this research, and I intend through it to investigate the traits by which a supreme god is recognized and acknowledged as one in African religion.

The struggle between Yahweh and Pharaoh is not a dispute between a god and a human king. It represents a struggle between two gods, since Egyptian Pharaohs claimed divine status. On a second note, this acknowledgment formula, found in a purpose clause in its literary context, shows that Yahweh's actions in the contest were undertaken (i) in order to prove that he has the power to save Israel, his people, (ii) in order to discredit Pharaoh's claim to ownership over Israel, and (iii) in order to assure Israel of Yahweh's credibility and authenticity and to encourage her to worship him as Lord. In

In Second Isaiah, the phrase is found in Is 45:3 and 49:23 but also in many and various formulations and in various contexts in which Yahweh proves that He alone, and not the idols of the nations, has the power to save (Cf. 42:6,8; 43:3,10,11,13,15,25; 44:6,7,8,24; 45:3,5,6,18,21; 46:9; 47:4,8; 48:12,17; 49:23,29; 51:12,15; 52:6; 54:5).

The phrase is more numerous in Ezekiel where it is found in judgment contexts against Israel and against other nations (6:10,13,14; 7:4,9,27; 11:10,12; 12:15,16,20; 13:9,14,21,23; 14:8; 15:7; 16:62; 17:24; 20:20,26,38,42,44; 22:16; 23:49; 24:24,27; 25:5,7,11,17; 26:6; 28:22,23,24,26; 29:6,9,16,21; 30:8,19,25,26; 32:15; 33:29; 34:27,30; 35:4,9,15; 36:11,23,38; 37:6,13,28; 38:23; 39:6,22,28).



ancient religions, conflict between gods is undertaken especially in order for the gods to win human recognition and attention. For a god to be, it needs human recognition and worship. A god whom no people worship does not exist, and a god begins to exist from the moment in which a people adopts and begins to worship it. In the cosmogonic myths of Babylonian and Canaanite peoples, Marduk and Baal obtained the assurance of the loyalty of other divine beings and humans before they assumed the office of 'king' and 'lord' in their respective lands.

The Hebrew Bible, however, dissociates itself from this kind of thinking because it asserts the absolute nature and character of Yahweh, who does not need human recognition in order to be. Yahweh did not begin to exist from the moment in which Israel acknowledged his lordship (Exod 15). The Bible had introduced him as the God of creation (Gen 1) and the God of Abraham (Gen 12). Rather than incentives for recognition, Yahweh's salvific acts on behalf of his people were undertaken as proof of his mercy and grace.<sup>5</sup> This notwithstanding, there are indications in the biblical account which show that even the God of Israel needed human acknowledgment in order to be 'lord' in the land. In the covenant making of Exod 19, Yahweh secured the expressed loyalty of the people of Israel before the covenant was eventually made.

- \* Another implication of the acknowledgment formula consists in the fact that a god needed to accomplish certain extra-ordinary acts as proof of supremacy. In order for such acts to be worthy of a supreme god, they must be actions without which the world and worshippers of this god would not have existed. They are, therefore, acts of essential and primary benefit to humans and to the world. In *Enuma Elish*, for instance, Marduk ended the era of the oppression of smaller gods by the evil and wicked Tiamat; he created humans so that they could relieve the gods of their burdens, and he created the world as a worthy habitation for humans. These are the primary acts of a benevolently supreme god. For this, he merited the worship and loyalty of both gods and humans who recognize him as king and lord. Similar stories are told about Baal, the lord of Canaan. The primary acts by which Yahweh convinced Israel of his divinely supreme status are the exodus from Egypt and the gift of the land. These are acts without which

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Exod 3:7-9, 16-17.

Israel would not have existed as a people and as a nation with a land and with a god.

Studies in comparative religion have revealed that ancient histories of religion are developed around these and similar thought patterns. Ancient peoples of the Near East lived closely like neighbors and shared similar cultures and beliefs. They created similar stories about their different gods and their different nations and it is easy to see reciprocal influences in the similar myths they created from their different contexts. Among all these, the Hebrew religion was unique because of its singular monotheistic characteristic. Nevertheless, the ways the Hebrews narrated the Yahweh story reveal that they shared the ideologies of their neighbors, and therefore, influences from other cultures abound in the Bible. One can easily deduce from the foregoing that in spite of the differences in the religions, the peoples were all bound to prove the supremacy of their national gods with the use of a similar language. For a national god to be supreme it must have certain deity traits and it must exhibit or wield power in certain ways.

## 7.2 The Research: Setback and Difficulties

Many studies have been done on the nature of African religion and on the characteristics of the divinities of African people. Authors that are mostly known for this kind of research are: J.P. Danquah, (*Akan Doctrine of God*, 1944), Geoffery Parrinder (*West African Religions*, 1961), E.B. Idowu (*Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, 1962), E.A. Ade Adegbola, (*Traditional Religion in West Africa*, 1983), John Mbiti (*African Religions and Philosophy*, 1969, 1999), L. Magesa (*African Religion. The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, 1997), E. Ikenga-Metuh (*Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions*, 1987), and many others. In the myths of origin of African peoples, I intend to discover acts by which gods claimed supreme divine status and lordship over their peoples. In other words, it is important to discover in the stories that Africans tell about their gods what constitute the claim to supremacy of the god(s), which different peoples of Africa recognize as the supreme god or Supreme Being. The paper intends to use the divine traits in the Yahweh story as a scheme for the study of such traits in the supreme god of the African peoples. The result of this research will determine if and how the African concept of the Supreme Being could be related to the biblical Yahweh, the God of Israel.



Usually, stories concerning the claim of national gods are found in cosmogonic and historical myth of a people. A myth is chiefly an account of the deeds of a god, and in spite of its fantastic nature, it represents the way in which intellect, imagination and emotion combine to communicate a perceived truth. In other words, it is a symbolic or poetic expression of that which is incapable of direct statement.<sup>6</sup> The literary genre that we call Myth is generated from a sense of the mysterious in nature and human life and from human attempt to explain it. The ancient peoples understood that the natural world is imbued with powers. They also believed in the sacred or numinous quality of the power or powers in control of or manifest in various aspects of the natural world and human life. It also seems that our ancient forebears did not simply speculate over the natural world and the powers that controlled it; their entire lives were determined by their experience of these powers. Therefore, myths could represent the stories of gods in relation to a people and to the world.<sup>7</sup>

In order to write this essay, the first stage of my research involved reading any book I could find on African Religion. After I had read a significant number of monographs and articles in this field, the difficulties of the research began to dawn on me. Some of the setbacks that anticipated my research and which hinder its exhaustive completion are the following: Firstly, there is abundant literature and studies on the mythology of Israel and other ancient peoples but with regard to African religion, many authors claim that African myths in the rank of those found among the peoples of Ancient Near East are yet to be discovered.<sup>8</sup> This statement signals the difficulty involved in finding adequate sources for this research. Secondly, it is difficult to talk of African religion in the singular. Each African people has a different system of beliefs and rituals. Although some authors think that there is sufficient identity among the Africans which should warrant our

<sup>6</sup> J. Finegan, *Myth and Mysteries. An Introduction to the Pagan Religions of the Biblical World*, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1989, p.15.

<sup>7</sup> Myths are different from Epics and Legends. The distinction lies in the fact that the chief actors in Epics are represented as human, while a story is called a Legend if it supposedly goes back to some actual historical event, remembered however dimly. Cf. Finegan, p.15.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, Tikpor, p.367.

speaking of African religion,<sup>9</sup> the difference in religious expressions still pose sufficient problem for a theological study of the religion(s).<sup>10</sup> Thirdly, religion in the vast African continent has thrived until modern times on oral tradition. The absence of sacred scriptures, personal accounts of religious experience from earlier centuries and of historical documents is a stumbling block for research.<sup>11</sup> However, Roger Eastman<sup>12</sup> warns that according to its nature, the African religion is written in the hearts of those who practice it. "Where the individual is, there is his religion, for he is a religious being". Owing to lack of written sources, the last part of the paper is presented as guidelines for research in the traits of the supreme god in African religion.

After this articulation of the difficulties, the argument of the paper is developed under four subheadings:

- i. It studies the nature and character of the Supreme Being in African religion. Among the deities in Africa, the supreme god is singled out here as an object of research, and therefore, as a match for Yahweh, the Supreme God of Israel
- ii. The nature of this paper does not allow a detailed and analytic study of the Myths of Origin of African peoples. A critical evaluation of them will suffice here.
- iii. Characteristic traits of Yahweh are presented alongside that of the Supreme God in African religion.
- iv. On the basis of the findings, one would make basic conclusive statements as to how the African religion comes close to biblical faith?

### 7.3 The Supreme Being in African Traditional Religion

Africans believe in the existence of a Supreme Being, but alongside this being are a host of other supernatural beings who are enlisted below according to their hierarchical importance: spiritual beings (Divinities), ancestral spirits and nature spirits. Generally, all Africans believe in the existence of a Supreme Being, but African religion begins to differ only with

<sup>9</sup> For instance, L. Magesa, *African Religion. The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997, p.14-16.  
<sup>10</sup> Cf. J. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Oxford: Heinemann, 1999, p.1.  
<sup>11</sup> Cf. Mbiti, p.3-4.  
<sup>12</sup> R. Eastman (ed.), *The Ways of Religion. An Introduction to the Major Traditions*, Oxford: University Press, 1999, p.447-448.



regard to the beings on the second layer of the pantheon: the divinities. R.J. Gehman says: "If there is any reason we should speak of African religions (plural), rather than African religion (singular), it is this belief in divinities".<sup>13</sup> Different from the peoples of West Africa, the peoples of Central, Eastern and Southern Africa do not believe in divinities, even though they believe in ancestral and nature spirits.<sup>14</sup> When this is the case, it is necessary to define the religion of the peoples of Central, Eastern and Southern Africa as monotheistic.

The pantheon of divinities in West Africa has a striking parallel with that of Ancient Egypt. Among West African people, the Yoruba religions have the highest number of divinities (*orisa*, meaning 'legion'), about 1700 of them. The Ashanti, in their turn, are unique in having temples built for the god and special priests trained to minister in his courts.<sup>15</sup> A major purpose of mythology among West African people is to explain the relationship of the divinities to the Supreme Being, and there are as many theories of relationship as there are mythologies. Some African peoples regard the other spirits as hypostases, representations or refractions of the god.<sup>16</sup> In spite of this disagreement with regard to the existence or otherwise in the divinities, belief in the existence of a supreme being is one of the constant and unifying factors in African Traditional Religion. Despite the divergences in different African myths, a single common strand unites all of them: the universal recognition of a supreme being, and the creator-creature relationship of that being to creation and to the human being in particular.<sup>17</sup>

It is evident that the peoples of West Africa do not accord to the divinities the same status that they accord to the Supreme Being. Sometimes they are understood as agents of the Supreme Being. It, therefore, seems to appear that polytheism grew out of the understanding that a god (the Supreme Being) is insufficient for the innumerable problems and evils that beset

<sup>13</sup> R.J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, East African Educational Publishers, 1989.2002, p.124-125.

<sup>14</sup> Gehman, *African Traditional Religion*, p.124.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. G. Parrinder, *West African Religion*, London: Epworth, 1961, p.15.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, in Nuer religion. Cf. E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956, p.200; Magesa, *African Religion*, p.204.

<sup>17</sup> R.G. Tikpor, "Myths" in E.A.A. Adegbola, *Traditional Religion in West Africa*, Kenya: Uzima, 1983, p.368-369.

humankind and creation. Moved by the desire to ensure protection and security in every aspect of life, peoples postulate the existence of other supernatural beings who take care of these matters.

Different African peoples have divine names that imply the existence of a supreme god. Here, two of these names receive special mention. The first is the description of the supreme god as 'the almighty; the most powerful' (Chukwu [Igbo], Olodumare [Yoruba], Nkulu-Nkulu [Zulu]). This description assures the power of this god to save his people from danger. The second name describes the supreme god as 'Creator of all things' (Chineke [Igbo], Mulumba [Swahili]). These two descriptions of the supreme god are chosen for this study because they underlie the epithets (creator and savior) by which the national gods of ancient eastern peoples claim supremacy and lordship over the peoples who worship them. The next paragraph investigates into the history, if any, of these divine names.

#### 7.4 **Myths of Origin of African Peoples**

After an initial definition of myth in the second section of this paper, a more detailed exposition of its meaning is undertaken here in order to expose its central significance for the present research. Investigating the origin and history of the gods has been an object of human reflection from ancient times. In ancient polytheistic societies, this kind of reflection belongs to the genre of speculation about ultimate realities, that is, the origin and story of the chief or national god, origin of the world (creation), origin of humanity and its place in creation, the deity that governs the land, the temple and the cult.

Myths are divided into cosmogonic, aetiological and historical.<sup>18</sup> Cosmogonic myths are myths of Origin and they are stories that explain the remotest origin of a people, as well as the origin of their social, economic and political institutions. The Supreme Being is the principal actor in its stories. Etiological myths explain the sacred rites and customary practices of a people, while the historical myths speak of heroes and heroines. These myths are the outcome of human attempt to explain historical institutions

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Tikpor, "Myths", p.368.



and developments by appeal to non-historical factors and forces.<sup>19</sup> Some African peoples do not have cosmogonic myths. The Idoma people, for instance, do not speculate on the origin of the world or of the peoples in it.<sup>20</sup> In most revealed religions, myths contain above all the stories of the original revelation of the god to the progenitor of the race and this revelation is handed down through generations. Therefore, every myth exposes a pattern of behavior for the people. Tikpor defines it as "a veritable mine of theological research in primitive cultures".<sup>21</sup>

Instead of an exposition of the myths of African peoples, a critical analysis of them would suffice for the present research. An author that had done this is A.E. Afigbo, "Fact and Myth in Nigerian Historiography" in E.A. Ade Adegbola (ed.), *Traditional Religion in West Africa*, Kenya: Uzima Press, 1983, pp.419-445. This author classified the historical tradition of Southern Nigerian peoples into two categories: (a) the Myths and Legends, which deal with events believed to have taken place in the very early periods of a community's existence. (b) the Chronicles of more recent and more easily remembered past. Generally, this author has a negative evaluation of the mythic traditions of these peoples. According to him, each of these peoples regards its origin and development as synonymous with the origin and development of the entire world. For instance, the Yoruba claim that the entire world was created by Ile Ife. The Bini, Nri and Igbo people make similar claims for their respective supreme gods.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the accounts claim that the ancestors of each of these peoples came from heaven and that their supreme gods depended on the agency of lower animals to make the world a habitable place. They also assume that certain social practices or norms are the outcome of encounters between man on the one side and an animal on the other, or between an animal and another. An instance is the Igbo story about the origin of death as a result of a matching of wit, persevering and racing ability between the dog and the toad.<sup>23</sup> Afigbo considers all these accounts as irrational because they do not appeal to

<sup>19</sup> A.E. Afigbo, "Fact and Myth in Nigerian Historiography" in E.A. Ade Adegbola (ed.), *Traditional Religion in West Africa*, Kenya: Uzima Press, 1983, p.423.

<sup>20</sup> R.G. Armstrong, "Prolegomena to the Study of the Idoma Concept of God" in E.A. Ade Adegbola, *Traditional Religion in West Africa*, Kenya: Uzima, 1983, p.340.

<sup>21</sup> Tikpor, "Myths", p.370.

<sup>22</sup> Afigbo, "Fact and Myth", p.423.

<sup>23</sup> Afigbo, "Fact and Myth", p.423-424.

common sense and they undermine the role of the human being and the physical environment in the evolution of human culture and society.<sup>24</sup>

At this juncture, it is important to say that A.E. Afigbo, and many others like him, does not understand the roles that dramatic characters (God, human being, animal, inanimate objects, ecc) play in a myth of origin. These characters are clothed with symbolic robes. It is expedient to understand the significance of their representative symbols in order to appreciate the truths that these stories intend to communicate. M. Oduyoye rightly says that myths are literary and not scientific hypothesis. They are poetic in style, and therefore, they contain many personifications of abstractions.<sup>25</sup> It should not surprise anyone if any people depict the story of their remotest origin as the origin of the world and of their supreme god as the creator of the world. This is because the epithet 'supreme' is not given in relation to other divinities in a particular land but a god is supreme by virtue of its claim to supreme power in the world. We also find such claims in the myths of origin of ancient Israel and other peoples of the Ancient Near East. In the legends of Israel and Assyria, for instance, one finds instances of Yahweh's and Assur's respective claims to universal rule, which gives the gods the character of 'almighty'. More concretely, Yahweh's power is demonstrated positively in his power over Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt, his power to end the exile of his people and to appoint a ruler who decrees such an end in world politics (Is 40:1). It is also defined negatively in his ability to hand his people over to foreign rule when they sin against him (Is 42:24). In the ancient world, a war between two nations is understood as a contest between gods. The victory of a nation in war is the victory of its god. We must suppose that even in African religion, the epithet 'supreme' is a god's claim to fatherhood in creation, and therefore to its power as universal ruler of creation.

Afigbo's critique of the myths and legends of Southern Nigerian peoples has many positive aspects. This author decries the presence of a chasm between the remotest past of the people (represented in their myths and legends) and their recent past, which the Chronicles narrate, in order to obtain a coherent

<sup>24</sup> Afigbo, "Fact and Myth", p.424.

<sup>25</sup> M. Oduyoye, "The Spider", p.376.



historical perspective of the historic present.<sup>26</sup> According to this author, this lack of a connecting link between the past and the present is the cause of the social and political disruptions that humiliate these peoples. Myths are important because if they contain what is most original and primary in the life and culture of a people, African peoples who lament the loss of their cultural values could always hope to recover them through a fresh study of their myths and legends.

For a more fruitful research into the African Religion, it is important to consider the nature of the context in which the recognition formula is used in the books of Exodus, Isaiah and Ezekiel. The general context in which the phrase "... so that you will know that I am the Lord" appear is the judgment context. In the exodus story, the major motivation for Yahweh's action is in order to deliver an enslaved people from their oppressors (Exod 3:7-9). In Exod 7-15, the formula is used to guarantee the liberation of Israel by means of mighty deeds (7:5). It is also used to undergird Yahweh's power as Lord of Egypt in the ordering or removal of the plagues in such passages as Exod 7:17; 8:10,22; 9:14; 14:4,18. In Deutero Isaiah, the formula is used in relation to God's power to release his people from exiled countries and to resettle them once more in their own land. Ezekiel uses the formula especially in his indictment of Israel for her sins and in the different scenes of impending disaster for the sinful nation.<sup>27</sup> These references highlight the fact that although the remote context of the formula seems to be the contest of the gods (as in the case of Yahweh and Pharaoh), it rather underscores the character of Yahweh as moral judge of Israel and the nations. Clear and unambiguous in the biblical account is the moral aspect of the events described in Egyptian enslavement and oppression of Israelites on the one hand, and on the other hand in Ezekiel's descriptions of Israel's acts of violence and crime. The context shows that God's power to punish and to save belong to his character as supreme King and Lord. For the purposes of this research, this particular context provides a hermeneutical key for the study of the traits of the Supreme Being in African Traditional Religion.

<sup>26</sup> Afigbo, "Fact and Myth", p.427.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. footnotes 3 and 4 above.

### 7.5 Guidelines for a Study of the Traits of the Supreme Being in African Religion

Human reflection and record of the origin and relationship of the gods were possible only through the literary genre of myth. Ancient peoples created different kinds of epic myths. Though their religions were polytheistic, these myths regarded their national gods and their relationship with other gods. For instance, the Babylonian epic, Enuma Elish, was the story of Marduk and how he made his way from being a subject god to being the chief god and patron of the land. Similarly, Assyrians and Canaanites have similar stories about their national gods. These stories assign certain responsibilities to the national god in relation to its people and its land. As creator and sustainer of life, the god must have played a vital role in the being and survival of the people. The brief study undertaken in the section above of the context in which the recognition formula is found highlights above all the character of the supreme god as judge. In fact, ancient mythologies of Mesopotamian and Canaanite people speak of human wickedness and the various punishments visited upon mankind for its sins. However, some authors reveal that in spite of the interest of the gods in human ethical behavior, this was not necessarily their exclusive or even primary interest. "The inability to produce a divinely sanctioned, absolute, standard of right and wrong was among the inherent limitations of mythological polytheism".<sup>28</sup> This study has revealed that only a god who claimed to be author of life and cosmic order could also claim a corresponding right to the restoration of life and order. Different from its neighbors whose religions were polytheistic, Israel came through experience to recognize that Yahweh alone reserves the right to life and to cosmic order. Yahweh exercises this right through judgment.

The following, therefore, are the most outstanding deity traits in the religion of Yahweh, which one could use as guidelines for the study of similar traits in the Supreme Being of African religion. Three most important traits are discussed. The first two are the most essential traits of any god who merits the epithet 'supreme'. The last belong to the general traits of divinities.

N.M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis. The World of the Bible in the Light of History*, New York: Schocken Books, 1970, p.51.



***Almighty God, Creator of Order in the world***

A god cannot stand at the pinnacle of the ladder if it does not prove to be most powerful. The god in question demonstrates its power through victory in a combat. Its antagonist is a deified agent of chaos, usually an aquatic deity whose reign was characterized by disorder among the gods. The god who is victorious over the god of disorder proves to be more powerful. The purpose of the combat was to eliminate the agent of chaos and to create cosmic order. This story is reflected in cosmogonic myths of Babylon (*Enuma Elish*), those of the Canaanite peoples and in the mythopoeic ideas in the Bible. Hebrew monotheism cannot admit any kind of combat between Yahweh and another god. Rather, they show that Yahweh demonstrates his power through victory over historical forces. The conquest of such forces leads at the same time to creation. In Genesis 1, creation is the outcome of the ordering of chaotic forces in nature. In Exodus, the creation of Israel is the outcome of Yahweh's victory over Pharaoh, another agent of chaos in history. In the theology of the Pentateuch, Genesis and Exodus represent two beginnings respectively. One narrates the beginning of the world and the other, the beginning of the people. Each of these beginnings is the outcome of Yahweh mighty acts in nature and in history. Through such mighty acts, Yahweh creates, restores order and saves his people.

African peoples have god(s) who is called originator and creator of life. It is possible that this same god or another god is named in relation to cosmic order. Further research will be carried out in this particular area.

***Guarantor of Justice and Morals***

As the creator of order in the world, one of the most essential traits of the supreme god is its character as guarantor of order and harmony in the world and in history. According to the biblical tradition, the idea of the harmony of being in the world has its remote cause in Yahweh who is the creator of all. It is also represented in his making every created reality from the dust of the earth.<sup>29</sup> Note that the Hebrew word for earth is *adamah* and man is *adam*. This similarity of nomenclature signals the strong bond between mankind and the rest of creation. The ancestors in African religion are those who lived to the full the ideals of justice and moral during their lives in the world. The maintenance of order in the world relates to the

<sup>29</sup> Cf. the creation account in Gen 2.

What Makes

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human being

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vocabulary  
is *sa'ug* or  
the agonized  
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23; Amos 1:  
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interpre  
of God  
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What is said  
moral is true  
any people  
socio moral  
the African  
fundamentally

<sup>30</sup> Sarna, *U*  
<sup>31</sup> Cf. Sarna

preservation of this harmony and integrity of being. Its disruption brings about evil, injustice and violence, and this shows that there are obligations which the divinely established moral order of the universe imposes upon human beings.

The thoughts expressed by N.M. Sarna are relevant here. According to this author, in the Yahwistic religion, evil is not defined chiefly as "the dishonoring or offending of God ... it is not the neglect of sacrificial gifts, the disregard of an oracular utterance or the making of a false oath that arouses the ire of the Deity. The sins are entirely on the moral plane".<sup>30</sup> The vocabulary that best explains the disruption of order, injustice and violence is *sa'aq* or *za'aq*, translated as 'outcry' and denotes the cry of the oppressed, the agonized plea of the victim for help in some great injustice.<sup>31</sup> The outcry of the oppressed is the reason for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18:20-21; 19:13), the judgment of the Egyptians and the liberation of Israel from bondage (Exod 3:7), and it appears in the legal and prophetic traditions as an event that deserves serious divine attention (cf. Exod 22:21-23; Amos 1:3-2:3; Is 5:7; Ezek 16:49-50). Such acts of violence are means by which the land is defiled (Lev 18:24-25). Yahweh's fatherly concern for the oppressed and punishment of the oppressors represents the particular way in which he guarantees justice and order in the world. Another remark by Sarna merits particular attention here:

The idea that there is an intimate, in fact, inextricable connection between the socio-moral condition of a people and its ultimate fate is one of the main pillars upon which stands the entire biblical interpretation of history...[This idea] constitutes the Torah's vindication of God's action in destroying the inhabitants of Canaan before the invading Israelites (p146).

What is said here of Yahweh as the custodian and guarantor of justice and moral is true of African religion. Africans also believe that the well-being of any people depends both on the relationship with the divine and on the socio-moral condition of the people. The basis of justice and moral relates to the African conception of being, which is essentially unifying. Being is fundamentally one; all beings that exist are ontologically bound to one

<sup>30</sup> Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, p.145.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, p.145.



another. In the words of H. Sindima, "all life — that of people, plants and animals, and the earth — originates and therefore shares an intimate relationship of bondedness with divine life; all life is divine".<sup>32</sup> The profound unity and solidarity of all realities is one of the notions on which the African mode of life rests. Ikenga Metuh describes it as "a continuous exchange and interaction between beings in the universe and irrespective of the realm to which they belong".<sup>33</sup> Consequently, beings affect one another for good or for evil. A benevolent influence promotes life, peace, justice and harmony, while a pervasive influence from one being weakens the other beings and threatens harmony and integration of the whole.

Another African scholar, Laurent Magesa, describes this notion of life from a moral perspective. According to him, this unity and solidarity of beings is instituted and sanctioned by God.<sup>34</sup> Within this sacred fabric of life, human beings carry the responsibility of maintaining the bond between the divine and human realm (including all created realities). Magesa continues, "sustaining the universe by maintaining harmony or balance between its two spheres and among all beings is the most important ethical responsibility for humanity and it forms the basis of any individual's moral character...it determines the quality of life of the human community in the universe and the quality of the universe in itself".<sup>35</sup> The sacredness of the universe implies that it is woven of religious significance, for which God is the ultimate point of arrival and departure of all ethical life.<sup>36</sup>

In spite of the description above, further research in this field shows that in African religion, the Supreme Being is not the ultimate authority of ethical life and of cosmic order. Moreover, H. Sawyerr says that although God is the final recipient of sacrifices of expiation and thanksgiving in African religion, they are also offered to specific spirits, depending on the purpose of the sacrifice.<sup>37</sup> There is need for further research in this regard, and this is

<sup>32</sup> H. Sindima, "Community of Life: Ecology Theology in African Perspective" in C. Birch et al. (ed.), *Liberating Life: Contemporary Approaches to Ecological Theology*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990, p.144.

<sup>33</sup> Ikenga-Metuh, *Comparative Study*, p.3; cf. also Mbiti, *African Religions*, p.15-16.

<sup>34</sup> Magesa, *African Religion*, p.72.

<sup>35</sup> Magesa, *African Religion*, p.73.

<sup>36</sup> Magesa, *African Religion*, p.74.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. H. Sawyerr, "Sacrifice" in K.A. Dickson — P. Ellingworth (eds.), *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1969, p.64-65.

necessary especially when we consider that in most African cultures the earth goddess is regarded as the custodian of morality. In most African cultures, the earth goddess is a divinity different from the supreme god. It is necessary to examine the relationship between these two divinities and how their actions differ or co-relate in regard to the people and to the nation.

*Ability to Provide for Human Needs and to Protect from Malignant Forces*

Divine power in the action of a god is measured by the extent to which it is beneficial to human needs and to the created order. It is expected that God provide his people with such needs as land and sustenance, and protect them from malignant and external enemies. In the Pentateuch especially, Yahweh, the God of Israel, proved his lordship most especially in his ability to provide the needs of his people in the desert (Exod 16-17; Num 11; 20-21). Only a powerful god could feed and satisfy the thirst of a wandering people in the desert. He also protected them and prevented their being annihilated by dangerous and powerful desert tribes, the likes of the Amalekites (Exod 17:8-16).

The world in which humans live is beset with malignant forces. In Mesopotamia, there was a strong sense of the numinous. Natural forces had divine and extra-ordinary powers and humans needed to protect themselves from them by wearing amulets, charms and other protective devices. This is where Hebrew religion differs fundamentally from polytheistic religions. In Polytheistic religions, human recourse to protection from other divinities apart from the chief god of the land is clear sign of the insufficiency of the latter. In Hebrew religion, the idea is propagated especially in the prophets that Yahweh is sufficient for his people for protection from evil supernatural and historical forces and for the sustenance of his people. The power of a god is measured by its ability to forestall the diminishing of life and to protect the integrity of being of his people. In the same manner, humans who serve as special agents of the gods do so only if they possess the power and authority to do what the god would do for his people. Yahwism distinguishes itself from all others in this regard. From its very beginning, Yahweh demanded from his people trust and loyal service that is unconditional and totally personal. The prophetic literature defends the freedom of Yahweh from human conditioning. Their outbursts of rebellion during the wilderness sojourn (Exodus - Numbers) were understood as



signs of lack of faith in the God who had demonstrated his power in their primary history.

In African religions, there is an underlying belief that a god does not merit the name if it does not do things that are beneficial to humans and to world order. Certain prayers in African Traditional Religion show that in times of need the powers addressed in prayer include various kinds of divinities, but the divine names that recur more than the others are those of the supreme god and the ancestors. The ancestors are understood to have obligation towards their living children and it is they who provide the means to affirm life in the world.<sup>38</sup>

## 7.6 Conclusion

The above study is meant to motivate further research in this field. One important way in which African religion comes close to biblical religion is the belief in the Supreme God, who is known among other names as creator and almighty. A theological study of the history of these names is not yet possible because of the absence of cosmogonic myths in African religion, which measures up to the rank of similar myths among ancient eastern peoples. Before any conclusion is made on the relationship between the African supreme god and Yahweh, the national and supreme God of Israel, the following considerations are necessary:

- a. Does the African supreme god have a national character or anything similar to it? Is there anything in the origin and societal organization of a people that motivated the worship and loyalty which Africans accord to the supreme god?
- b. What is the implication of the legal context of the acknowledgment formula for the definition of the supreme god in African religion? Is the African supreme god also a custodian of moral and justice? If other gods fulfill this role in any African society, what is the relationship between these gods and the supreme god?

The foregoing are the most pertinent questions that should guide further research in this field.

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. Magesa, *African Religion*, p.195-197.