

GENERAL FEATURES OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS¹

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Abstract

There are many similarities between African and Indonesian traditional religions, but there are for sure also differences. This article gives the main lines of the African Traditional Religions in two parts. The first part is the belief system with the following topics: the supreme being; divinities; spirits; ancestors; magic, sorcery, and witchcraft. The second part is a description of the practice: secret societies; religious experts; common rituals and feasts; personal rituals; sacrifice and prayer. Most African Traditional Religions are tied to ethnic groups. If people have the feeling that their traditional religions become less effective than ‘imported religions’ as Christianity or Islam, they accept the new religions and sometimes even abandon their traditional religion. On the other hand within Christianity and Islam there is still influence of the traditional religions.

Keywords: African traditional religions, belief system, religious practice.

Abstrak

Dalam perbandingan antara agama-agama asli Afrika dan agama-agama asli Indonesia ditemukan banyak persamaan maupun perbedaan. Dalam artikel ini garis besar Agama-agama asli Afrika dibahas dalam dua bagian. Bagian pertama adalah sistem kepercayaan, di mana topik-topik berikut dibahas: yang maha tinggi; dewa-dewi; roh-roh; leluhur; magi, ilmu sihir, dan shamanisme. Bagian kedua adalah deskripsi dari praktik-praktik:

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paguyuban rahasia; ahli-ahli religius; ritus-ritus dan perayaan-perayaan umum; ritus-ritus pribadi; berkorban dan berdoa. Jika orang Afrika merasa bahwa agama-agama asli mereka tidak lagi sama efektif dibandingkan ‘agama-agama yang diimport’ seperti Kekristenan atau Islam, mereka akan menerima agama-agama baru dan kadang-kadang bahkan melepaskan agama tradisional mereka. Dari segi yang lain pengaruh dari agama-agama asli masih dapat ditemukan dalam Kekristenan dan Islam.

Kata-kata kunci: agama-agama asli Afrika, sistem kepercayaan, praktik keagamaan.

Introduction

I am sure that to present African Traditional Religions (ATR) to an Indonesian audience might potentially be very interesting as there are certainly a number of similarities to be discovered in comparison with the Traditional Indonesian Religions but possibly some marked differences as well. To compare our religion with that of others is anyway usually a worthwhile undertaking as it sharpens the understanding and perception of our own religion. This article may also further inspire some of the readers to still think a bit more closely about the Traditional Indonesian Religions.

With African Traditional Religions I refer to the original religions of African peoples or ethnic groups that have been and are still handed down from one generation to the other. This handing down is usually an oral process, implying that the respective religions usually do not possess something like holy scriptures. I am using the plural “religions” as there are as many of them as there are African peoples which means each individual people does have his/her distinct religion. Nevertheless, what I am going to present is not one particular example of an African Traditional Religion but rather a synthesis of what many of them have in common, while sometimes pointing out some of their differences as well.

In a Christian context we study these religions because they usually influence the beliefs and religious practices of the majority of Christians

though they might no longer be widely practised. Those who convert from African Traditional Religions to Christianity do not suddenly and completely leave all their traditional beliefs and practices behind. On the contrary, many observe a more or less open syncretistic type of Christianity, combining both religions in an often very creative way.² As much as this happens it often shows us that our Christian teaching and practice does not completely match with the needs and desires of the people we address. And whenever we realise this we should take a critical look at what we are teaching and doing and if need to adjust it.

This presentation is based on more than 20 years of experience in and with the African context and on studies of works of scholars of the respective fields.³ My African friends and colleagues may bear with me if they may sometimes feel that what I am presenting here is not in line with their own understanding.

Part One: The Belief System of African Traditional Religions

1. The Supreme Being

I deliberately use the term “supreme being” here and not “God” in order to avoid thinking too much in Christian terms right from the start. It is disputed whether all African peoples have an idea about a supreme being but the great majority certainly does though with marked differences as to the importance of that supreme being for the everyday life of the respective peoples.⁴ Regarding the nature of the supreme being, it may transcend human dimensions of time and space though the individual peoples are usually not interested in worlds beyond their own. The supreme being is often described as very wise and knowledgeable, usually more than any human. It is thought to be difficult to escape its presence and it can do and achieve things beyond human capacity.⁵ Traditional African believers talk about the supreme being very much in human terms, just as Christians do in relation to God. It has human features and characteristics like ears, eyes, hands and feet. It can be glad or angry. It can be merciful and do well to

people but it can also punish them. It is often believed to be the highest judge who brings justice to those who call upon it.

The dwelling place of the supreme being is often believed to be the sky and in some places the names for sky and for the supreme being can even be the same. Yet others think the supreme being dwells below. In any way, the local name for the supreme being is usually very revealing. It mostly refers to a certain characteristic of or idea about it. As to if and how the supreme being can be approached the ideas differ considerably. Some think it close and easily to be approached while others believe it to be far away, not bothering much about what people do. In the first case we usually have well-developed rituals of how the supreme being is approached, depending on the respective occasion and the persons involved. Nevertheless, individuals hardly ever have a close personal and emotional relationship with the supreme being. Instead the relationship is rather a more technical one.

Looking at the works of the supreme being, almost all African peoples associate some kind of creation with it. This is strongly indicated by many of its traditional names like creator, maker or originator. The creative act itself is usually perceived in very concrete terms, often using certain materials and tools. But the focus of this creation is clearly only the coming into being of a particular people and its environment, not of the whole world and the whole humanity. Still, together with the process or act of creation a certain order of things is also usually believed to have been established by the supreme being as well.

On the other hand, for those peoples who have a well-developed belief in the supreme being and for whom it plays an important role in their everyday life another of its works is more important, that is, the sustenance of the community. The supreme being provides for it whatever is necessary, like life, rain, sun, fertility or health. This belief can be expressed through certain names of the supreme being like caretaker, keeper or even father. On the other side, through its punishing interventions it can also be believed to be the source of mental disturbances, virulent diseases, endless trouble, epidemics among animals and humans, national calamities such as drought,

locust invasions, wars, floods and finally even death. In some religions the supreme being is linked with the governance of human society and may be referred to as king, ruler, governor or chief, depending on the social structure of the respective peoples.

Certain natural phenomena can also be attributed to the supreme being. I already mentioned the sky as its potential dwelling place. Other objects can be the sun, moon and stars as signs of its presence, or thunder and lightning, storms, earthquakes and floods as signs of its movement or of its punishments. Finally, also as signs of its presence or as dwelling places it can be associated with lakes, rocks, caves or mountains.

2. Divinities

Divinities occupy the second place in the supernatural hierarchy of traditional Africa. They are usually imagined as persons, anthropomorphically. Sometimes they appear to be capricious and unpredictable. They are closer to humans than the supreme being and therefore easier to be approached. Normally they are timeless but we know of examples where old ones disappeared and new ones appeared. In their particular realm they have the supreme power.

We may try to differentiate three groups of divinities though it is not always possible to maintain the respective distinction. The first group of divinities are personifications of natural phenomena and objects. This could be storms or thunder and lightning for instance, particularly in areas where these often appear. Heaven and earth could be believed to be divinities, often in the form of a couple. Especially the earth is often a prominent divinity sometimes called mother. One example is Ala from among the Igbo in Nigeria. She is of special importance as she is responsible for fertility in every respect. She has a shrine in every village and regular sacrifices are offered to her. Like heaven and earth, sun and moon can also be a divine couple. Finally, water of all kinds like the sea, rivers, lakes, waterfalls and rain can be perceived as divinities. One example is Buk, a female divinity of water and the rivers among the Nuer in Southern Sudan. Libations and first fruits are offered to her.

A second group of divinities are personifications of the supreme being's activities and manifestations. Some of the already mentioned natural phenomena are frequently attributed to the supreme being as well. It may therefore be held that a divinity has been delegated to take over the specific function of the supreme being associated with the respective phenomenon. We can also observe that many peoples hold the believe that the supreme being has delegated some or even almost all of its governing functions to certain divinities.

A third group of divinities are deified heroes. For this group we can trace the origin of the respective divinity as there are usually legends or myths of how a once famous person finally acquired the status of a divinity. One example is Sango from among the Yoruba in Nigeria. He is believed as the divinity of wrath, manifested in thunder and lightning. As the story goes, he is said to have been the fourth king of Oyo, the ancient Yoruba capital. He is told to have been able to call down fire from heaven, but unfortunately one time one of these fires destroyed his own family, and in remorse he hanged himself. Nevertheless, soon after his death people started to worship him because of his great powers, and gradually he became a divinity.

But apart from this third group it is difficult to talk about a creation of divinities. It is possibly more correct to say that they came into being in the nature of things with regard to the divine ordering of the universe.⁶ Africans do not experience reality in a limited rational way according to the Western concept of rationality but in a more complex way including the supernatural sphere as well, and divinities represent some of these supernatural experiences. An additional interesting observation is that, the more stratified and differentiated a society is, the more it tends to believe in divinities, while in many societies they are completely absent. West Africa is certainly the centre of the belief in divinities.

It has to be taken note of that divinities usually receive regular worship, normally much more often than the supreme being itself. Festivals are held in their honour, they often have shrines where they receive sacrifices and prayers are addressed to them. They even frequently have their own priests.

On the other hand, their relationship with the supreme being is not altogether clear. As we have already heard, sometimes the divinities are thought to be the agents of the supreme being or its intermediaries. But my personal impression is that they are rather independent of it though some may at one stage have been linked with the supreme being in one way or another.

3. *Spirits*

There are countless spirits in the realm of African Traditional Religions and they are almost impossible to describe and to approach scientifically. Most of them have no names but there is no place where they are not to be found. As the term indicates, they are spiritual beings and believed to be still closer to humans than divinities. But they are also less powerful than divinities and below them in the supernatural or spiritual hierarchy though there is not always a clear dividing line between spirits and divinities. What one ethnic group may call a divinity, another group may call a spirit.⁷

Spirits are usually considered to be invisible but are believed to be able to make themselves visible if they want. Sometimes they show very strange features, sometimes they appear in human forms, sometimes as animals. They often appear in dreams. Spirits can take possession of people so that they become mediums and the spirits speak through them. Their time of activity is usually believed to be the night. Spirits are immortal, they cannot die, and they have no family or personal ties with the living. They are still more capricious and unpredictable than the divinities. Therefore, people often fear them, though by definition they are neither good nor bad. Spirits are more powerful than humans but still can be manipulated by certain experts, usually through magic or sacrifices. The nearer the spirits are in their functions and characteristics to the divinities, the more they receive official worship or may even have their own priests.

We may consider three different groups of spirits. The first group are the spirits of the dead. They have been humans before but people don't remember any longer when they lived or who they had been. In this case

they have often lost their names. They may receive offerings from their descendants at certain occasions. In addition, in many African Traditional Religions it seems there is a special sub-group of the spirits of the dead, a class of spirits called evil spirits. These can be wicked people who died and for various reasons cannot become ancestors, or people who have not been properly buried. Certain calamities and particularly certain illnesses can be attributed to them and they are feared by the living. Normally specific rituals exist to protect the living from these evil spirits and a religious expert may almost always be in a position to help.

The second group of spirits are the spirits of nature. As we had said that Africans usually do not perceive nature as something purely physical, but as something spiritual as well, as with the divinities, spirits are often associated with natural objects or phenomena and there is no need naming them here again. Certain natural objects can also be seen as their dwelling place like woods, bushes, groves, forests, deserts, rivers, lakes, rocks, caves, trees or mountains. They are also believed to dwell underground or around the village. In general, animals, plants and inanimate objects can be considered to be or to house spirits. Sometimes certain trees are sacred or special animals can be considered to be spirits. Especially the more important spirits of nature have to be treated carefully because otherwise nature would no longer function in its normal way or the peaceful living of humans would be endangered. Therefore, the spirits of nature frequently receive regular offerings.

The last group are the guardian spirits. Some African peoples have the concept that a guardian spirit is responsible for the entire life of a single person. Often it is imagined somehow as a double of that person. An example is Chi among the Igbo in Nigeria. Other African peoples believe in guardian spirits protecting houses and/or farms of a particular family. Sometimes the spirits are responsible for a whole extended family, village, lineage or clan. They have to be well cared for otherwise they will be angry and not fulfilling their tasks. This is why they are usually the object of regular worship and the recipients of offerings.

4. *Ancestors*

Ancestors play a very important role in many African Traditional Religions. Nevertheless, there are quite some African peoples where ancestor worship plays only a minor or even no role at all. In those religious systems, usually the belief in and worship of a supreme being is much more developed.⁸ Where the belief in ancestors exists, it is the ultimate goal of a person within a respective community to become one. But in order to achieve this, a person has to fulfil certain conditions. He or she must have died at old age and must have died a natural death and have been properly buried with all the necessary funeral rites performed. He or she must have had children and must have lived a good life and must have been a prominent family member. In addition to that many societies do not know female ancestors.

The ancestors are usually believed to live in the next world or underworld, mostly thought not to be far away. Their lives there are imagined very much in line with their earthly lives. They keep their personality and reproduce human activities even though they are thought to be spiritual. Important ancestors can be remembered for a very long period, while the less important ones are usually forgotten as soon as nobody remembers them personally any more. They may enter the world of the spirits of the dead.⁹

Regarding the status and role of the ancestors, it is worth noting that they remain part of the family. Nevertheless, as soon as somebody has become an ancestor, he or she has acquired some extra power as compared to the living. He can do more, he knows more and he is of a higher status now. However, important to know is that, the ordinary ancestors have usually only power over their direct descendants. Only the more important ancestors have power over a larger group. All the ancestors are usually thought to be the owners of the land on which the living now dwell. Therefore, if any portion of land is to be leased out or nowadays even sold, the ancestors have to be consulted.

The ancestors guard and protect the family. They may warn a certain family member of a certain danger which is threatening to befall the individual or the family by visiting him or her, maybe in a dream or a vision

or even during daytime. They are safeguarding the right behaviour of their descendants. They were the ones who implemented all the existing laws and customs and they make sure that they are kept. If somebody misbehaves, he or she may be punished by the ancestors through sickness or any other kind of misfortune. The ancestors also provide families with everything necessary for a good life. They are often responsible for fertility in a very wide sense, among humans, animals and plants. They may be responsible for good health as well and for providing success in hunting, fishing, trade and commerce, education and all things attributed to a modern idea of development like roads, modern houses or electricity. We clearly see that ancestors can have functions which elsewhere are ascribed to divinities or even only to the supreme being.

Finally, ancestors may provide a means of communication between the living and the spirit world, especially the supreme being. Sometimes it is thought that the living can only communicate with the spirits or the supreme being through the ancestors. Often the terms mediator or intermediary are used to describe this. However, this concept often seems to be only a secondary explanation, though there may well be peoples who hold this view traditionally.¹⁰

How do the living react to and interact with the ancestors? Some venerate, others worship them with often no clear dividing line between the two. Usually the ancestors are prayed to and receive sacrifices. Especially where they are believed to provide all things necessary to their descendants they are usually worshipped. They certainly receive food and drink as offerings and quite often it is thought that they are dependent on this so that they cannot survive without it. In rare cases, the ancestors are even threatened to do good to their descendants, else they may face the consequences and not receive any further offerings. Therefore, many say the relationship between the living and their ancestors is reciprocal, that is, it is a mutual relationship of give and take in which one party cannot survive without the other. But it is certainly never a relationship between equals. It is like that of parent and child or like that of chief and subject.

In some cases the living are not too happy when they are constantly visited by their ancestors as this is usually not considered to be a good sign. There might be trouble or danger ahead. Consequently, among certain African peoples there are special rituals to get rid of the ancestors if they appear too often. In this case the attitude of the living towards the ancestors might be considered to be ambivalent. They fear them and they need them at the same time. Finally, the ancestors can be met at home, at their graves, at shrines, in groves, in general at many places where one meets the spirits as well. Sometimes certain animals may be associated with the ancestors. Snakes are quite prominent here. For instance the python, which is often considered to be a divinity or a spirit in West Africa, is often a symbol of the ancestors in East Africa.¹¹

5. Magic, Sorcery, and Witchcraft

With the field of magic, sorcery and witchcraft we are entering the most difficult terrain of African Traditional Religions. Views are contradictory and definitions and terminology are far from being clear. Starting with the concept of magic, I take what I consider a useful definition from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: “Magic is the ritual performance or activity believed to influence human or natural events through access to an external mystical force beyond the ordinary human sphere.”

As probably contrasting to the personal powers we have described so far, magic largely deals with impersonal powers. Where these powers come from and if, and if yes, how they may be related to the powers already described is not clear at all. It is usually only traditional experts who are skilled in dealing with these powers. They would have to do and/or say something to use them in a magical way.

It seems that in the African Traditional belief system magic can be distinguished by two different principles according to which it is believed to function, contagious magic and homoeopathic magic.¹² With contagious magic, the underlying assumption is that things that were once in contact with a person continue to interact with him or her. Important are former

parts of the body like most especially hairs or nails, but it can even be urine or secretions like spittle, or it can be things that the person had close contact with like clothes or sleeping mats or other personal items. The belief is that these things are somehow mystically linked with the respective person and whatever happens to them may happen to the person concerned as well. If you are in possession of a certain part or item of somebody you have control over him or her.

The other type of magic, homoeopathic magic, is sometimes also called imitative magic. The underlying assumption here is that like produces like, that similar things have similar effects. We may think for instance of rain-making rites. Often pots with water are used or water is sprinkled somewhere and by doing this the rain will be caused to come. Or clouds of smoke are produced to the effect that clouds of rain will come. You imitate what should happen and by imitating it you cause it to happen. A woman in hope of children may receive a symbolical child, it can be a doll or it can even simply be a banana finger. Receiving this symbolic child will lead to getting a real child. The water symbolises the rain, the smoke symbolises the clouds, the banana finger symbolises the child.

Magic might be used in a positive or negative way. We could talk of constructive and destructive magic. Looking at constructive magic, examples are rain-making or the bringing of fertility or of success in trade, business or even education. It is even used to win or to maintain the love of somebody. Other examples include protection against locusts, thieves or witches. This could also be called protective magic and it may protect everything, the whole ethnic group or clan or family or house or animals or fields. Charms and/or medicines are usually applied in this context as the mystical powers are believed to be manifest in them. Sometimes divination can also be linked with magic. A diviner may have the capability to reveal hidden things by the help of the mystical powers. Destructive magic can be used to harm others or their property or to hinder their progress. Often this was called black magic, and then positive magic was referred to as white magic, but I think these are not very fitting terms which should therefore be

abolished. It is simply the fact that magic as such is neutral and that people may use it in a positive or negative way.

The belief in and practice of magic is still very widespread in Africa. One of its characteristics, so it seems, is that it is not tied to a certain place or territory. Often the ancestors, the spirits, the divinities and even the supreme being are thought to dwell in a certain area where they exercise their power. But the mystical powers are simply everywhere. If people move from one place to another they may, to a certain extent, leave their ancestors, spirits, divinities and even the supreme being behind, but they will never escape the mystical powers. Even if people go as far as Europe or the US, they believe that even there they can be reached by the mystical powers.

Moving on to the term and concept of sorcery, this is still very much less clear than magic. Sorcery may most probably best be understood as belonging to the category of destructive magic. It is regarded as antisocial and illicit, the resort of misguided persons who should instead have used other more accepted means for settling the issues that have aroused their envy or anger. The entire object of sorcery is negative, is to harm and to destruct and in virtually all African societies, at least traditionally, people differentiated between magicians and sorcerers.

To witchcraft sorcery could be linked in the sense that the same moral status is accorded to those who are believed to practice or to be involved in either of it. On the other hand, sorcery remains distinct from witchcraft in different perspectives. One is that sorcery is a deliberate act usually done during daytime while witchcraft is usually practiced during night-time and quite sometimes unknowingly. But for some societies this may only be a scholarly distinction, and often, especially nowadays, people no longer distinguish between sorcery and witchcraft and attribute every negative experience with the mystical realm to the latter. Beliefs in both sorcery and witchcraft involve magical methods of identifying the supposed sorcerer or witch or wizard and it is permissible to apply protective or even destructive counter magic against either of them. But different from witchcraft, sorcery quite often involves true poison.¹³

Talking about witchcraft in particular, it is clearly an evil or at least selfish and therefore anti-social employment of the mystical powers and is usually done secretly. The aim of witchcraft is either to harm others or to gain benefits for oneself. Different from magic, witchcraft usually does not involve a specific cult or medicines or require certain rites to be performed. It rather seems to be something inherent, something which is part of the wizard or witch him- or herself. In this respect it is different from sorcery as well. Witchcraft is believed to entirely work on a spiritual, not a material or physical level. Nobody would consult a witch or wizard in order to harm another person as one would consult a sorcerer.

One basic assumption for the belief in witchcraft is that the spirits of humans can leave the body and can do harm to others psychologically and physically and to their property. The person concerned may lie on the bed sleeping while his or her spirit is causing havoc. Witches or wizards can captivate the souls of their victims and cause them to work on their invisible estates bringing wealth to themselves. They can affect everybody and the ones affected do not have to be their enemies as is the case with sorcery, even though they frequently may be. If they do this, they supernaturally feed on their victims, getting stronger through the power of these persons while the victims are getting weaker and weaker and may finally die if not some strong medicine may cure them. This is also called spiritual cannibalism.¹⁴ Another belief is that witches or wizards can transform into animals and can thus harm others. Certain birds like night-jars, owls or other animals like snakes, bats or leopards could be associated with them. It is believed that when the animal is killed the witch or wizard will die as well.

Sometimes it is believed that the witches or wizards have their own communities or secret societies and in order to become a member of them, one has to pay an entrance fee, often in form of the soul of a close relative who will then be spiritually eaten by the witches or wizards and will soon die. They have their regular meetings and ceremonies on mountains or in the forests where they share their experiences. Witchcraft can either be inherited or acquired. Some families are frequently accused to have witches

or wizards in their midst. In this case, the individuals concerned might not even be aware that they are witches or wizards. They might just have inherited the habit of witchcraft and perform it unknowingly. This may be one of the reasons why sometimes people who are accused of witchcraft confess though they are actually not aware of having practised it. Still after their confession they would feel relieved from the pressure which had been put on them.

The community defends itself against witchcraft for example through consulting magicians who are asked to counteract it and who are asked to identify the witches or wizards. The accused are often publicly exposed and frequently forced to undergo an ordeal if they do not confess, in order to prove their innocence. Some of the secret societies, particularly in West Africa, have as one of their tasks to detect witches and wizards. On the other hand, if the need arises, if the community has the impression that it is too much haunted by witches or wizards, a smelling-out might be organised. Experts are engaged for this who may go from house to house or who may call for a public assembly claiming to be able to detect the witches and wizards of the community. Certain medicines or ordeals may be used for this activity or the experts may place themselves in a trance in order to fulfil their task.

During the last decades, witchcraft has appeared, if I may say so, as the most vibrant part of the belief system of African Traditional Religions, frequently becoming the pre-dominant feature.¹⁵ It is common all over Africa as a sign of the crises of African communities. It is causing deaths almost on a daily basis as people who are accused of witchcraft might just be killed on the spot. Some African governments have even included acts of witchcraft in their penal code while others try to protect people who are accused of it. It needs a more rational and sociological approach and the communities have to be enlightened and those who are accused need to be protected.

Part Two: The Practice of African Traditional Religions

1. Secret Societies

Secret societies are a common phenomenon throughout West and parts of Central Africa. They are very important institutions within the traditional society and their functions are many and diverse. Many secret societies are political or social in character, others have cultural or economic functions and still others more religious functions. I will limit myself to the more religious dimension and will discuss some common features.¹⁶

One important aspect is that, people who want to become members of a secret society have to be initiated. Through the process of initiation the new members are believed to share in and have access to the mystical powers which are thought to be present within the respective secret society and can now use and manipulate them. This is one of the major reasons why people want to become members. In addition, the members of the society have often a considerable influence and a position of prestige and honour. The great majority of the secret societies are for men only.

Another important common feature is the aspect of secrecy as this is what actually gave these institutions their name. Many of their internal activities, practices, rituals, items and places are secret and the members are strictly forbidden to reveal any of these or else would have to face severe penalties. Their meetings are usually also not open to the public. Some even have their own secret language, which the initiates have to learn and which is only understood by the members, and sometimes the initiates receive new names which are only known to their colleagues.

The more religious secret societies may be connected with the ancestors. They are said to represent them, particularly in relation to their role as the guardians of the laws and customs of the community. In addition, as already mentioned, some have the function of counteracting witchcraft. They are thought to be able to detect witches or wizards or to practice effective counter magic. We may say it is sometimes their general task to fight any negative interference of the supernatural powers. Some of them

appear or perform only during the night-time and then women and children have to stay inside.

Other secret societies may have almost the same functions but the religious aspect is thought to be different. Their power is not related to that of the ancestors but to other spiritual powers or beings which are at times even given divine attributes. Magic is actually more or less an element of all the secret societies. The supernatural powers or spirits, or sometimes the ancestors or certain divinities, thought to be the driving force of the secret societies are at times clearly worshipped. They receive prayers and offerings and rituals are directed towards them.

Among some African peoples we can observe that secret societies largely take control of the religious life of the community. They determine the dates and features of traditional rituals and feasts and their leaders fulfil important religious, we may even say priestly functions. But this does not seem to be their primary purpose. It is rather secondarily that they have taken over proper religious functions.

Another important element of many secret societies is the masks and dances.¹⁷ The masked dancers of a secret society are often thought to represent the spirit embedded in the society or to personalize its supernatural power. They are no longer thought to be human but having transformed into spirits. Often extraordinary phenomena are reported in connection with them. The dances are usually performed during public initiation ceremonies and/or burials of one of the members of the society. The latter is an important occasion for the secret societies and often they dictate the complete funeral procedure without very much consulting with the family of the deceased. The background is that the member of the secret society as having a share in the mystical powers has to be treated separately and handled with care else misfortune might befall the community.

2. Religious Experts

In virtually all religions we find certain people who have the ability and the task to deal with the supernatural on behalf of individuals, families

or the whole community. We may say the more developed and complex a society the more developed is its religion and the more it needs religious experts. As concerns the terminology for the different religious experts there is great confusion and disorder. I will try to be a bit systematic. Nevertheless, often this will remain difficult because in certain societies religious experts have various functions which in other societies are assigned to different specialists.

As one group of religious experts we may distinguish priests or priestesses. They perform certain religious ceremonies and rituals usually directed towards a certain personal supernatural power, be it the supreme being, a certain divinity, a spirit or the ancestors at a sanctuary, maybe a grove, shrine or temple. They lead their people in all important public and sometimes private religious activities. In doing this, they occupy the role of an intermediary between the community and the supernatural. Sometimes they are professionals who receive special training and initiation and perform lifelong services. Among many peoples the priesthood is hereditary and belongs to certain families. Priests and priestesses are usually married, but certain social, economic and ethical standards might be required of them. Often they are elderly persons who are venerable, trustworthy and devout. When performing their ceremonies or rituals or even during a certain time before the event they may have to observe certain taboos. For instance they may have to refrain from sexual intercourse or avoid certain other activities or certain food or be secluded from the public. As concerns their outward appearance some wear specific clothes or other ornamental and/or protective items or are marked by a certain hairstyle.

Another specific group of religious experts is what I would call medical experts. The term is rather unusual but from my point of view is a more fitting neutral one to describe all the individuals in a traditional society who are occupied with health and healing, which are definitely among the most central issues in any given society and receive much attention.¹⁸ Every community has one or more medical experts. They are known to everybody, perform their duties usually in the open and are highly respected

and honoured but sometimes also a bit feared, since they have a special knowledge of and relationship with the supernatural. Their main task is to cure people. But in the traditional African context this is not simply a natural or scientific affair. Since the real causes of diseases are usually to be found in the supernatural sphere, this supernatural sphere has to be involved in the cure as well. Healing is a holistic process in African Traditional Religions involving physical, psychological, social and religious aspects.

The patient has to believe in the medicine else it may not work and various supernatural powers may be involved in the healing process. They are the ones who provide the knowledge and the means of healing and the application of certain concrete medicines need to be accompanied by ritual. To be a medical expert can be hereditary and belong to certain families but the profession can also be learned or acquired by others. Here, maybe even more than with the priests, the people have to be well trained and usually they are also expected to be of good character. Some have a reputation which even spreads across ethnic boundaries and they are consulted by people from far away. As well as the priests the exercise of healing may require the observation of certain taboos from the medical expert in order to guarantee and secure a successful result.

Next to curing the sick medical experts could also have the task to counteract witchcraft. Here their work may overlap with that of the diviners, because these often have the skill to detect witches and wizards too. Still, sometimes there is a special class of people charged with fighting witchcraft sometimes known as witch-doctors. In the course of their work they also apply medicines and conduct magical rituals. They have to be strong persons with strong powers and medicines since it is very dangerous to deal with witchcraft. Sometimes they perform their task of detecting witches and wizards in the open, assembling the community while at times placing themselves in a trance. They may also have the skill of cleansing the witches and wizards so that they may be reintegrated into the society.

Diviners might be considered another special group of religious experts.¹⁹ A diviner is somebody who is able to reveal something hidden

through magical means, that is, through tapping and dealing with the mystical powers, or is in general able to get in contact with the supernatural, especially the ancestors. Their methods or techniques to accomplish their task include casting selected objects and interpreting the result, observing phenomena within nature or setting themselves in a trance. Things they may reveal are causes of illness or misfortune or things which happened in the past or, more important, which are going to happen in the future. They may detect thieves and witches or wizards or find lost articles. The diviner can be a true specialist or he or she is more a generalist who fulfils other tasks and duties of religious experts as well. The profession can also be hereditary but maybe less than in other cases and the performance of it often goes together with the observation of certain taboos. Usually diviners have a very fine sensuality to judge people and their situations and they render an important service to the community, since they provide holistic explanations for all kinds of problems and show a way out.

A special group of people in the context of divination are the mediums. They may work on their own or they may be related to diviners or priests or priestesses where they act as intermediaries between the respective expert and a personal supernatural being. Usually they fall into a trance and/or become somehow possessed by the respective supernatural power in which case they would reveal messages from it often without afterwards knowing about it. If they are related to another expert, the one would then usually have to interpret the message given through the medium.

A last special group to be mentioned here is that of rain-makers. In certain areas they may better be called rain-controllers because their task may as well be to stop exceeding rain. Their function can also be taken care of by a diviner, medical expert or priest but some societies have their specialists for it. Their work is again linked to the supernatural, be it the mystical powers or be it any personal supernatural power. The process of controlling rain is usually accompanied by rituals and of course based on a lot of experience.

3. *Communal Rituals and Feasts*

Having discussed important personalities for the practice of African Traditional Religions we come to the practice itself in more detail. First we will look at communal rituals and feasts.²⁰ Most of the traditional communal rituals are related to agriculture as this is the economic basis of most of the traditional societies and its success or failure determines the survival of the community. Therefore, the religion of a people has to offer certain rituals to secure success or to prevent failure. There are basically four types of agricultural rituals, sowing or planting, first-fruit, harvest, and crisis rituals. A special form of the crisis ritual is rain-making which can also take the form of a communal ceremony. In rare cases there is still a ritual during the growing season of the crops to guide this process.

Starting with rain-making as crisis ritual, on a special day the community would assemble at the sanctuary and a ritual sacrifice would be offered to the respective supernatural power. The kind of sacrifice and the details of the act of offering it are usually prescribed, and it may be accompanied by prayer directed towards the respective supernatural power too. Apart from offering a sacrifice other rituals may feature in combination with it. The principle at the background of it is that of similarity as already described in the context of magic under the name homoeopathic or imitative magic.²¹ Other crisis rituals follow the basic pattern just described. Reasons can be locust invasions or the massive occurrence of other damaging insects or animals, floods, plant diseases or low soil-fertility.

As concerns the regular agricultural rituals and feasts they all have similar features. First the date of the feast is announced. This can be done by religious experts after observing certain signs within nature or by the community authorities after consultation. The location of the feast is the central sanctuary or sacred place of the community. This will be specially prepared for the occasion. It might be decorated in a special way and it will be cleaned or even cleared. Frequently the sacred place is only used for this special occasion and is taboo for the rest of the year. People may not cut grass or collect firewood or wild fruits there and they may have to

put off their shoes before entering. Besides the place or sanctuary itself certain paths leading from the various settlements towards it or leading to other sacred places like the graves of the ancestors might be cleaned and cleared as well. This is often thought to prepare the way for the supernatural powers, most often the ancestors, to enable them to move about unhindered so that they can bring their blessings. The most important element for the ritual proper is again the sacrifice and very often prayers are spoken as well. Usually a master of ceremony will preside over the whole ritual but other specialists may be involved too. Apart from these ritual aspects elements of feasting are essential. Eating and drinking are usually always part of the feasts and singing and dancing are very common features too.

The various agricultural rituals differ from each other depending on their particular purpose and we cannot describe them in detail here. If it is a sowing or planting ritual then the main aim is to get the consent of the supernatural for the work of the community and to secure its support for it and its blessings for the growing plants. If it is a first-fruit ritual the purpose is to get the consent of the supernatural for the process of harvesting, because nobody is allowed to harvest the new crop before the feast and ritual has taken place. The supernatural which took care of the growth also has to take care of the harvest and the new crop has to be sanctified and thus made safe for consumption. If it is a harvest feast then usually part of the harvest is brought as an expression of thanksgiving. At the same time people often already ask for further blessings during the next agricultural cycle.

Communities whose backbone of the economy is animal husbandry usually also have certain communal rituals to secure the success of their activities and to protect their animals from any kind of danger. In addition, they may have crises rituals, for example in case a deadly disease may have befallen their herds, threatening their existence. Religious experts may be involved and the supernatural, which is frequently the supreme being itself, is approached through sacrifice and prayer. Protection and blessings are sought and/or thanksgiving is offered.

Besides these rituals trying to secure the economic basis of the respective communities we will have a brief look at the so-called purification

rituals.²² Purity is necessary to be successful in all one's endeavours and activities and if the community is defiled it needs to be cleansed or purified. The defilement may come from certain forbidden actions, from transgressing taboos or seriously violating the laws and customs of the community. If there were no purification the supernatural would sanction the transgression by sending all sorts of misfortunes. Sometimes even the act of one person may suffice to demand the purification of the whole community. The defilement is often only brought to light by a religious expert who searches for the cause of the many misfortunes which have befallen a community and then orders a purification ritual to take place.

As concerns the purification rites there are two basic categories, the regular and the extraordinary. The basic assumption of the regular one is that defilement occurs permanently, sometimes without people knowing it. Therefore, purification is a constant need and is done at regular intervals. The second form is only conducted when the actual need arises, that is, when a serious defilement is detected. The purification ritual proper once more follows the general pattern of the agricultural rituals. It's more specific aspects include the symbolical cleansing or purification of the people or the places affected. For this purpose water or even blood may be used or things which might be considered as being defiled might be burned like old clothes and other utensils or the grass and leaves swept together from the settlement. The defilement might as well be expelled or removed from the community by sending away those responsible for it. Related to this is the use of scapegoats on which the defilement is transferred and which are then also sent away. Finally the culprit or scapegoat may even need to be killed in order to wipe out the defilement.

4. *Personal Rituals*

The personal rituals have also been termed rites of passage as they usually guide and support a person in his or her transition from one stage in life to another.²³ Within the life-cycle of a person these are birth, coming-of-age²⁴, marriage and death. In addition, there are other specific initiation rites. These personal rituals are supporting the community in various ways.

They prevent social disruption by relieving the psychological stress of the individuals concerned, they provide clear instructions to all members of the society to continue life in a normal way with the new social arrangements and they affirm the social and moral values of the community and strengthen it by joint acts and expressions of them.

Yet the personal rituals have of course always a religious significance as well. Especially during moments of crises people need the guidance, blessing and protection of the supernatural and, therefore, the whole rite always includes special religious rituals of securing this supernatural support. Communication with the supernatural in the form of sacrifice and prayer and/or magical practices is an essential part of it. It expresses the concrete purpose for the participants, that is, to provide protection for a new born baby, a new adult or a newly wedded couple against all evil forces, or they help to guide a dead person successfully to his or her final destination and make sure that the surviving are not contaminated by death.

Still, one primary function of personal rituals that is often overlooked by scholars, perhaps because it seems obvious, is their role in providing entertainment. Passage rites and other religious events are the primary socially approved means of participating in pleasurable activities and religion has always been a primary field for art, music, song and dance.

We cannot discuss the various rituals in detail but usually they consist of three distinguishable, consecutive elements which are separation, transition and reincorporation. The person or persons on whom the ritual centres is first symbolically separated from his or her old status, then undergoes adjustment to the new status during the period of transition and is finally reincorporated into the society in his or her new social status. The coming-of-age ritual is no longer practiced very widely in Africa, but the rituals surrounding birth, marriage and most explicitly death are still major events in most African societies.

As concerns the second group of initiation rites, three of them are still of importance in many African societies. These are the initiation into a secret society, into the office of being a religious expert or into the office

of chief. The three elements mentioned above are also present here and we once more find religious rituals that accompany the whole process because the supernatural forces have to accept and support the decisions made by the people. Sometimes they may already be involved in the process of selecting suitable candidates to be initiated into their new positions.

5. *Sacrifice*

As we have seen in the last two chapters, sacrifice and prayer are essential elements of communal and individual rituals, expressing their specific religious dimension which we may call worship. We may look at the two as means of communication between humans and the supernatural, sacrifice being the nonverbal means of communication while prayer being the verbal means.²⁵

Sacrifices are often offered on behalf of a larger group of people, a family, clan, ethnic group or nation. This is either done by a religious expert or the head of the respective social unit. If the sacrifice is offered for an individual it can still be conducted by a religious expert, but among many peoples in principle every adult man, sometimes women too, can offer a sacrifice on his or her own behalf. The items to be sacrificed differ according to whom they are offered and according to the occasion when they are offered. Certain supernatural powers or certain situations may demand certain sacrifices. In general, we may say, the more important the supernatural being or the more important the occasion for the sacrifice, the more valuable the offerings have to be.

The most precious thing a community can offer is a human though this has almost completely been abandoned. Common are animals, and among pastoralists or cultivators who do animal husbandry this can be cattle, sheep, goats, chicken and sometimes dogs. Pigs are hardly ever offered because they are considered dirty.²⁶ Among the hunters virtually every animal can be offered. Animals can also be sacrificed in a prepared way, not only raw. Together with the meat of the animals often their blood as the carrier of life itself plays an important role as a sacrifice too. Apart from

animals agricultural products and liquids are offered. Virtually everything that grows on the farms can be offered but important is usually the staple food of the respective community. This is either offered raw or cooked. Among the gatherers every wild fruit can be offered. For the offering of liquids, which we call libation, palm wine, millet, maize or banana beer is used, sometimes milk or oil, rarely water. Nowadays beer, whiskey or other strong drinks are used as well.

Concerning the time and place for a sacrifice, we have actually already discussed this when talking about the communal and personal rituals. The times are either referring to a special occasion as a crisis in the community or an important event in the life-cycle of a person, or to regular occasions like those linked with the agricultural calendar or certain seasons of the year. Concerning the place we talked in general of the sanctuary. In the African context this can be a shrine, a special place in the compound, the graves of ancestors, sacred groves in the bush or sacred places in the village. Sometimes there is a special place within the sanctuary for the offering which we may term an altar in the broadest sense.

Libations are usually simply poured on the ground or on a special place. The same is done when blood is offered, often after the animals have been ritually slaughtered. A common way to deal with offerings of agricultural produce or meat is just to deposit it somewhere, knowing that some animals will eat it, but its spiritual substance being believed to be consumed by the supernatural recipients. Still another way is to burn the offerings, to bury them or to throw them in a river, lake or sea. Part of the offering is often consumed by the celebrants and this is thought to be a communal meal not only among them but including the supernatural as well. Sacrifices can be offered to any supernatural being. Most prominently among them are the ancestors.

As to the purpose of the sacrifices, one is propitiation or atonement. In a case where the relationship with the supernatural is disrupted or destroyed because people have misbehaved and face or fear the anger of some supernatural power a sacrifice is offered to restore this relationship, to

placate the anger of the supernatural. Another purpose is to receive benefits from the supernatural. People know that its help is needed in many instances and seek to assure this help by offering sacrifices to it. Next we have thanksgiving offerings. To this category belong all the harvest offerings. In addition, there can be various other reasons on the communal or individual level for a thanksgiving offering. Lastly we have communion sacrifices. They have the specific aim to establish or to strengthen the community, the bond between the people and the supernatural. Libations are instrumental but most important are the already mentioned sacrificial communal meals of the people and the supernatural.

6. Prayer

Prayer is the second major aspect of worship and the second, this time verbal, means of communication between humans and the supernatural, as an attempt from the humans' side to get in contact with the supernatural. Prayer very often accompanies rituals in general and sacrifices in particular. It often serves as an explanation to the religious actions of the people which otherwise might not be comprehensible. For our study of African Traditional Religions prayers are very instrumental because they reveal to us their "theology".²⁷

Prayers are normally offered by an individual, often a religious expert or the head of the family, on behalf of the group or of him- or herself. But in principle every adult member of the society can offer prayers to the supernatural. Communal prayers are rather rare. More common is that during a public prayer the group may interact with, or respond to, the one offering the prayer. As with rituals and sacrifices we have special and regular prayers and they are usually offered at fixed places. But beyond this prayer is more open to any kind of time and place.

Usually people stand while praying but they may also sit or squat. They may lift up their faces towards the sky, facing a certain direction or the sun or moon. Sometimes they may lift up their hands as well. It is unusual that people pray completely silently. Normally they will at least murmur. As

concerns the addressees it can be any of the supernatural beings. But often some of them are hardly approached by prayers, especially the supreme being because it is thought to be too far away and/or too elevated that it should not be bothered by humans. Frequently a certain hierarchy is kept in that the supreme being may only be involved if the problem cannot be solved on the lower levels. The primary addressees are usually the ancestors.

Most prayers contain two main elements, the invocation and the petition. Though the parts are not always clearly separated from each other they can usually easily be identified. The invocation is the most important part of the prayer which can never be left out because if the prayer is not addressed to somebody it cannot work. It is followed by the petition. This may include a description of the situation in which the people presently find themselves and is often made up of stereotype complaints which might not actually be true but which should arouse the compassion and helping attitude of the addressees.

The stereotype complaints are followed by stereotype petitions. The contents of these complaints and petitions could be everything which concerns the praying community or individual, anything which is either wanted or unwanted. Predominantly material items are asked for, but one may find the request for peace as well. Apart from traditional items like food, protection, posterity one finds modern items as well which may include education, money or modern infrastructure. As part of the petitions the element of intercession may be found. Finally the petitions can contain general short formulas, like “the ancestors should bring all good things”. The petitions are the core of the prayer and refer to the origin and principle purpose of prayer in general, that is, to make requests.

Apart from these, as I may say, true elements of prayers, one can find so-called incantations. These are usually made up of very stereotype spells which reveal their origin from the realm of magic in which spells or incantations are frequently used. Nobody is addressed but the spells are powerful and effective just because they are uttered.

Conclusion

Let me add some general remarks at the end of this article. An interesting observation is that African Traditional Religions are, almost by definition, tied to their respective ethnic groups. The idea of conversion or mission is usually completely foreign to them. You are born into your traditional religion and you die in it. Only if you marry into a different ethnic group, which was, traditionally, very rare anyway, you may some sort of become a believer of two religions. On the other hand, sometimes neighbouring ethnic groups could take over certain features of other traditional religions if they found them attractive and, this is more interesting, if they found them working, if they found them to be effective. This points out to the markedly pragmatic approach of most Africans towards religion in general. The various elements or features of your religion have to work, they have to be effective, or else they are useless and may even be abandoned. This explains the relative openness of African Traditional Religions and their believers to new religious developments including the coming of Christianity and Islam. If something seems powerful, seems helpful, seems to be effective, it can, yes it sometimes even should be adopted.

On the other hand, it is probably this openness which contributes to the seemingly gradual disappearance of African Traditional Religions from our world as many of their believers join either Christianity or Islam or nowadays become agnostics. Still I believe that some of their beliefs and practices described here will continue to exist in one way or the other for a time longer than most would imagine, be it openly or be it underneath a Christian or Muslim surface. Based on the African traditional worldview the Traditional Religions of Africa show a remarkable degree of resilience in the midst of global and local change and a sometimes amazing vitality. Particularly in times of crises they are still attractive to many believers. For me, to study them is enriching and inspiring and I have learned many lessons for my own personal faith. For if we believe that God has not left himself without witness in this world, he is certainly also present in the African Traditional Religions as well as in the Indonesian Traditional Religions.

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Endnotes

¹ This article is a revised version of a lecture I delivered at the Theological Faculty of Universitas Kristen Duta Wacana (UKDW) in Yogyakarta on 8 September 2011.

² I am deliberately and maybe a bit provokingly using the term syncretism here in a positive way, knowing fully well that this is highly contested by many scholars, but my focus here are “ordinary” Christians. See on the topic in line with my own argument from an anthropological point of view Andre Droogers and Sidney M. Greenfield (2001).

³ See as early major works for comparative studies on ATR from European authors the British Geoffrey Parrinder (1954) and the German Ernst Dammann, (1963). The major early comparative African works are the Kenyan John S. Mbiti, (1969) and the Nigerian E. Bolaji Idowu, (1973). Very interesting is also the Ugandan Okot p’Bitek’s critical study (1971). Next to my own studies and observations these works and Theo Sundermeier (1988) are the main sources of this article.

⁴ It is an interesting observation that belief in and worship of the supreme being is usually more developed among cattle rearing peoples than among agricultural peoples. Major works on the supreme being in ATR and additional sources of this chapter are Edwin W. Smith, (1950) and John S. Mbiti, (1970, 2012-2).

⁵ There is a tendency, particularly among African Christian authors, to present the supreme being of ATR very much in line with the Christian God, which, according to my understanding, does not do justice to the traditional African belief systems. The British Robin Horton (1984) has warned us in an article of the danger of interpreting ATR too much from a Christian perspective.

⁶ This is Idowu’s position, (1973:169), as against Mbiti’s, (1969:75f). See for their controversy also Emeka C. Ekeke and Chike A. Ekepara, (2010:214).

⁷ As some Western scholars considered the belief in spirits to be the dominant feature of ATR, the term “animism”, coined and popularised by Edward B. Tylor (1871), is sometimes still wrongly used to denote ATR.

⁸ This relates once more to the distinction between cattle rearing and agricultural peoples. The belief in and worship of ancestors is usually prominent among the latter.

⁹ John S. Mbiti, (1969: 83-91), has introduced the term “living-dead” for the ancestors as denoting their intermediary state between the world of the living and the world of the dead. But only few have adopted his terminology.

¹⁰ John S. Mbiti, (1969: 83f), seems to hold this view while I am rather sceptical. I feel that to reduce the ancestors to intermediaries between humans and the supreme being is often an attempt by Christian scholars to try to let ATR appear to be more in line with Christianity. This also applies to the sometimes very controversial discussion about the question whether the ancestors are only venerated or worshipped. The latter is clearly the predominant feature according to my understanding. See also Idowu, (1973:186), and the good discussion of different positions in Choon Sup Bae, (2008: particularly 52-57).

¹¹ See examples in Mbiti (2012-2:188-189).

¹² The respective terminology and concept goes back to James Frazer (1911-1915: particularly chapters 3 to 6).

¹³ A representative study on witchcraft and sorcery in (East) Africa is John Middleton and E.H. Winter, eds., (1963).

¹⁴ The term was probably introduced into the discussion by Geoffrey Parrinder, (1954).

¹⁵ See Peter Geschiere, (1997), Henrietta L. Moore and Todd Sanders, (2001), Gerrie Ter Haar, ed (2006) and Burghart Schmidt and Rolf Schulte, eds., (2007).

¹⁶ It is remarkable that secret societies have not received much attention by African or international scholars during the last decades. There are some interesting older, partly reprinted studies such as Frederick William Butt-Thomson, (1929, reprint 2003) and Eugen Hildebrandt (1937).

¹⁷ See as another already ancient study Leo Frobenius (1898, reprint 2011).

¹⁸ One of the best books on traditional African medical experts is Eric de Rosny, (1992). Common other titles which I am avoiding here are medicine-man, witch-doctor, healer or herbalist.

¹⁹ See the good study of Philip M. Peek, ed., (1991).

²⁰ I have taken the phrase “communal rituals” from Monica Wilson’s classical study (1959).

²¹ An interesting case study on rain-making and rain-makers is presented by Joshua Akong’a, (1987:71-85).

²² They are also commonly referred to as cleansing rituals.

²³ Pioneering on this subject was Arnold van Gennep, (1909, reprint 2004). There are a large number of case studies on personal rituals, usually specifically termed initiation rites, but as far as I know, there is not yet a comprehensive comparative study available.

²⁴ These are also referred to as puberty rites.

²⁵ On sacrifice see Luc De Heusch (1985).

²⁶ This is an interesting parallel to many religions worldwide, for instance Judaism and Islam, but different from many traditional Southeast Asian or Polynesian, Melanesian or Micronesian religions.

²⁷ See the very useful collections and analyses of traditional African prayers by John S. Mbiti (1975) and Aylward Shorter (1975). See principally Friedrich Heiler’s monumental study (1923).

