



DISTORTION OF FACTS IN WESTERN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF AFRICAN RELIGION, CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Etim E. Okon

Department of Religious and Cultural Studies University of Calabar, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This paper will identify some of the fundamental shortcomings in African ethnographic studies undertaken by Europeans in the nineteenth century. Existing works on Africa reveal a lacuna that is depressing to scholarship. The gap has to do with the failure of some Western researchers to approach African study as a unique venture. Admittedly, there are elements of interdependence and continuity in scholarship, but that does not equate belief systems into a unified whole. European ethnographers came to Africa with the ethnocentric mind-set that did not allow them to study the people's culture and religion objectively. The greatest negative impact of the lopsided ethnographic study of African society was in the misinterpretation of the traditional religion. The primary objective of this paper is to correct the hermeneutical error which has hindered progress in the understanding of the African world-view.

Keywords: African religion, Methodological ambiguities, African knowledge of god, African phobia, African history.

INTRODUCTION

African studies undertaken by European missionaries, anthropologists and administrators in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were generally unsatisfactory. Kalu (1985) has described the decision of the colonialists to study indigenous cultures as "enforced study" (p.133), which was motivated by "the necessity to base administrative and political policy on a definite knowledge of the people and societies of the region..." (p.134). Such curiosity produced haphazard works like (Leonard, 1968); (Kingsley, 1964), the four volume ethnographic work of (Talbot, 1969), (Jones and Daryll, 1967), (Jeffreys, 1935).

Kingsley (1964) rightly pointed out the purpose of European study of indigenous cultures: "Of the great human importance of the study of the religion, laws, and social status of the African native... it is too self-evident that it is our duty to know the true nature of those people with whom we are

now dealing in tens of thousands, so that by this knowledge we may be enabled to rule them wisely..." (414). Kalu (1985) has observed that the erroneous conclusion of some European scholars has bedevilled the study of some cultural forms thereafter (p.134). Owusu (1978) has rightly concluded that "the record of the results of conscientious European ethnographic explanations and discoveries has been, by and large, truly disappointing" (p.80).

Some ethnographic reports on Africa shows absence of seriousness, on the part of the researcher's, while others could be categorized as product of random sampling, without any credible evidence of cross-examination, or multiple confirmation of facts. It is therefore correct to infer on the average that some European scholars have mutilated, or distorted facts and sequence on African religion, culture and society. The task before indigenous scholars is to attempt a reconstruction of African cultural history, religion and cosmological ideas. Westerlund (1991) has emphasized the relevance of the "insider view" in the humanistic, scholarly study of African and other religions. According to Westerlund the highest priority in the academic study of African traditional religion should be to "Africanize" the methodology to reduce the risk of reductionism (p.23).

African-Phobia

Collins English Dictionary has defined 'phobia' as "a compelling fear or dread especially of a particular object or situation"(1978: p.1102). 'Phobia' also means 'extreme abnormal fear, or aversion to something or someone. Clinically, phobia is a symptom of a major psychiatric disorder. African-phobia in the present context means the hatred and fear of Africa. Of all the continents of the world, none has been humiliated and dehumanized as Africa. Being the sole victim of many disgusting episodes in human history, Africa has suffered the pains of slave raid and slave trade, conquest and colonization and alienation from common humanity. Today, Africa is seen as a crippled and parasitic continent that lives, and survives on the hospitality and goodwill of Euro-America through aids and loans, with a concomitant burden of repayment.

The phenomenon called African-phobia antedates the nineteenth century missionary enterprise. African-phobia can be traced back to sixteenth century definition of the word "black" by the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "Deeply stained with dirt; soiled, dirty, foul... having dark or deadly purposes, malignant; pertaining to or involving death, deadly, baneful, disastrous, sinister... foul, iniquitous, atrocious, horrible, wicked... indicating disgrace, censure, liability to punishment ..." (Jordan, 1982) For Europeans of sixteenth century, 'black' means "baseness and evil". Black was also a synonym for "diabolic and dangerous". A cursory glance at *Roget's Thesaurus of the English Language* shows that the word "blackness" has 120 synonyms, 60 of which are pejorative and none even mildly positive.

Davies (1976) in his article "The English Language is My Enemy" has listed some of the offending words that are interpreted as synonyms for the word "black" to include: "blots, blotch, smut, smudge, sully, begrime, soot, becloud, obscure, dingy, murky, low-toned, threatening, frowning,

foreboding, forbidden, sinister, baneful, dismal, thundery, evil, wicked, malignant, deadly, unclean, dirty, unwashed, foul, etc” (Davies, 1976) The word `whiteness` in *Roget's Thesaurus* has 134 synonyms, 44 of which are positive: “... purity, cleanness, immaculateness, bright, shining, ivory, fair, blonde, stainless, clean, clear, chaste, unblemished, unskilled, innocent, honourable, upright, just, straight-forward, fair, genuine, trustworthy...” (Davies, 1976).

Jordan (1982) has observed that for the Western mind, the concept of blackness has a direct antonym-whiteness and that the two colours imply opposition even in daily usage: “White and black connoted purity and filthiness, virginity and sin, virtue and baseness, beauty and ugliness, beneficence and evil” (qtd. in Husband 44). In 1578, George Best posited that black skin of the Negroes was a natural infection, which the forebears of Africa contacted and which is to be perpetually transmitted genetically. Blackness to the English mind is an incurable disease.

Psychological warfare was the most destructive manifestation of Africa-phobia. In 1781 the *Gentleman's Magazine*, which was the most popular, influential and widely circulated periodical in an editorial, described the Negro as sexually indolent, musical, stupid, indolent, untrustworthy and violent: “The Negro is possessed of passions not only strong but ungovernable; a mind dauntless, warlike and unmerciful, a temper extremely irascible; a disposition indolent, selfish and deceitful; fond of joyous sociality, riotous mirth and extravagant...” (1093-4).

The 1810 edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which was published in Edinburgh, had the following description for the Negro: “...stealing, lying, profanity, debauchery; nastiness, and intemperance, are said to have extinguished the principles of natural law, and to have silenced the reproofs of conscience. They are strangers to every sentiment of compassion, and are an awful example of the corruption of man left to himself” (p. 750). In 1884, that is seventy years later, a very different kind of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* had the following entry for the word Negro: “No full-blooded Negro has ever been distinguished as a man of science, a poet, or an artist, and the fundamental equality claimed for him by ignorant philanthropists is belied by the whole history of the race throughout the historic period” (p.318).

Africa: A People without History

European hatred of Africa was total. To Europe, Africa does not deserve any serious attention because historically Africa does not exist. Uya and Erim (1984) has observed that the history of Africa written by Europeans has been a subject of monumental distortions, ridicule and amusement (p. 1). Writing in the same vein, Nkrumah (1964) said: “The history of Africa, as presented by European scholars, has been encumbered with malicious myths. It was even denied that we were a historical people... that Africa was only propelled into history by the European contact. African history was therefore presented as an extension of European history” (p. 62).

It is even surprising that a great historian like Hugh Trevor Roper was also infected by African-phobia, which led him to posit thus: "Perhaps, in the future, there will be some African history to teach. But at present, there is none; there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness and darkness is not a subject of history" (Uya and Erim, 1984) David Hume, a distinguished English philosopher was also a victim of African - phobia: "I am apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the white. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no art, no science" (Uya and Erim, 1984).

Africa: A People without the Knowledge God

Some of the erroneous impression which anthropological study of Africa created was that Africans have no idea of God. It was on this faulty premise that the nineteenth century missionary enterprise was pivoted. As far back as seventeenth century, Olfert Dapper made the following comment on Africa: "No one, however thoroughly he has enquired, has ever been able to trace among all the Kaffirs, Hottentots and Beachrangers, any trace of religion or any show of honour to God..." (Tutu, 1978). Writing from the same mind-set Emil Ludwig retorted "How can the untutored African conceive of God? Belief in deity is a philosophical concept of which savages are incapable of framing" (Smith, 1961).

The denial of rationality to the African is an old idea in western conceptual scheme. Europe has always seen Africa as a baby who has refused to grow and mature. Johnson (1888) wrote: "The savage, with his low-grade mind, is not capable of holding rightly the abstruse dogmas of the Christian faith.... Negro rapidly masters the rule and regulations, so to speak, of the Christian religion he still continues to be gross, immoral, dishonest, and deceitful" (p. 482).

The greatest problem, which Europeans had with the African, was his inability to conduct his life as a normal human being created in the image of God. In European mentality, there is no serious difference between the African and the primates. To that extent religious instinct cannot be found in the African. The primates have a well-organized social organization devoid of religious inclination. Since Africans in Western world-view are satanic and diabolic, God cannot dwell in them. Robert Moffat in the nineteenth century declared that: "Satan has employed his agency with fatal success, in erasing every vestige of religious impression from the minds of the Bechuanas, Hottentots and Bushmen; leaving them without a single ray to guide them from the dark and dread futurity, or a single link to unite them with the skies" (Smith, 1961).

Methodological Ambiguities in the Study of African Traditional Religion

African studies were approached as an appendage of Christian theology. Traditional concepts were always removed from the context and compared to Western concepts. Udobata Onunwa has aptly observed that the interest of some scholars was clearly evangelical and the approach to the study of the traditional religion was a sort of *praeparatio-evangelica*. "The zeal to make the traditional

religion a vehicle through which Christianity could be propagated had for long dominated the thought of the African indigenous Christian theologians who could aptly be described as confessional scholars” (Onunwa, 1990).

If African traditional religion is studied just as a vehicle to understand, or propagate Christianity, such evangelical, or missiological motive could blur hindsight and comprehensive perception of the religious phenomena. The present writer concurs with Onunwa (1990) when he said: “... *praeparatio-evangelica* interest which has dominated the motives of most scholars in their studies of the traditional religion has made it a little difficult to see the religion as a contemporary living faith” (p. 135).

Another problem which this study shall seek to resolve is reductionism, which entails oversimplification and subjective interpretation. Western scholars in their ignorance of the African world-view often pass wrong judgment on African traditional values. This is the bane of African study and a major set-back to intellectual progress. Ikenga Metuh (1985) has dissociated himself from reductionist tendencies: “I have discussed beliefs and rituals as essentially religious phenomena, and have rejected any attempt to reduce them to mere psychological or sociological phenomena, or explain them away with evolutionary or other false assumptions” (p. ix, xii).

Some anthropologists have no interest in the beliefs and practices of the religious believers and the meaning these beliefs and practices have for them. Their quest for "unconscious" latent meanings is rooted on the assumption that *homo religiosus* do not understand why they believe, or act in one way or the other. Bolle (1979) has posited that: “The separation into categories of conscious/unconscious, among all borrowed scientific vocables, has probably caused more evil, more malicious slandering of peoples and traditions, during our lifetime, other than any other methodological approach” (p. 8). Bolle was also vocal in criticizing anthropologists who apply Western paradigm in interpreting the world-views of tribal or non-literate societies (Bolle, 1979).

It is no exaggeration to say that some highly placed Western scholars do not understand the meaning, nature and content of African traditional religion. Awolalu (1976) definition of African traditional religion is both perceptive and instructive: “When we speak of African traditional religion we mean the indigenous religion of the Africans. It is the religion that has been handed down from generation by the forebears of the present generation of Africans. It is not a fossil religion (a thing of the past) but a religion that Africans today have made theirs by living it and practicing it”(p. 275). African studies generally have suffered the problem of misinterpretation for too long. It was left for indigenous scholars to apply a down-to-earth methodological scheme to present the African world-view. Ikenga Metuh (1985) has said: “One of the problems of the studies of African religions is the problem of interpretation. Most writers in African religions are Europeans and Americans. Even the few African writers there, are Western trained elite, and write in one of the European languages” (p. 1). Non-African scholars of African religions still find it

difficult to interpret accurately the African world-view. That was the mind-set that fuelled criticism against human sacrifice in Africa. Ezeanya (1976) has said that when human beings were killed, it was in fulfilment of convinced religious obligation either to satisfy the demand of the gods for appeasement, or to give deceased monarch a retinue to escort him to the spirit world, and "... where twins were killed, this was done because it was felt that it was unnatural for a human being to imitate lower animals. Similarly, children who were born with feet foremost perished because such "abnormal" births were regarded as a crime against the mother earth" (p. 9).

Another serious flaw in previous studies of African traditional religion was the absence of historical analysis and periodization. Jacob Olupona has emphasized the importance of historical analysis and the need for researchers to show the historical process which has brought the religious phenomenon to its present situation. "One must say then that the lack of an adequate diachronic analysis in most of the works on African religion has inhibited progress in that field" (30). Traditional religion cannot be understood without a good grasp of traditional history. To a greater extent, history and religion cannot be separated. Contemporary study of religion (*religionwissenschaft*) emphasizes the history and phenomenology of religion.

Many scholars have recommended the phenomenological method as the most appropriate scientific model for the study of African traditional religion. Phenomenology is a methodology in which the contents of experience appear as phenomena to human consciousness. Edward Husserl, a German philosopher, was the chief proponent of phenomenology of philosophy. It was applied to the study of religion by two Dutch scholars: Gerardus van der Leeuw and P. O. Chantepie de la Saussaye. Phenomenology as a methodology for academic study of religion emphasizes two essential characteristics that are the principles; *epoche* and *eidetic* vision. The *epoche* connotes suspension or bracketing of value judgment while investigating religious data. *Eidetic* vision is a way of identifying the essences of the religious phenomena. Kohak (1966) writes: "By imposing the phenomenological brackets, we transform the contents of experience from a physical world of objects into a world of phenomena, that is, objects as meanings present themselves to a consciousness" (p. xiii).

The particular aspect of phenomenology suitable for African study is hermeneutical-phenomenology. Hermeneutics is the science of interpretation. It is a derivative noun from the Greek *dierneneuo* (Ramm, 1970) The main task of hermeneutical-phenomenological method is to interpret meanings of inter-subjective or intentional symbols in a given phenomena. Olayiwola (1991) who endorsed hermeneutical-phenomenological method posits thus: "It moves beyond empirical level of discursive questions of ultimate meaning, existence and transcendental being. In the search for meaning and understanding of the religious world-view, the hermeneutical-phenomenology emphasizes the essential dimensions that reside within the situation or world of phenomenon" (p. 254).

Still on the primacy of interpretation in the hermeneutical- phenomenology, [Peterson and Akerberg. \(1981\)](#) writes: “The researcher's task does not end with the collection of a greater or lesser number of facts. In his interpretation, he must be aware that a religion is more or less a system of beliefs, ritual behaviour and ethical structures. The phenomenology of religion appears as an important factor when it comes to interpreting and understanding the religion (p. 25).

Another issue that deserves clarification is the view of some scholars that religion as a social fact should be studied as a phenomenon *sui generis*. For people in this school of thought, religion should not be studied as recognition of its psychological, cultural and political roles, but as an academic exercise. Donald Wiebe writes: “...the academic study of religion must be undertaken for academic, that is, purely intellectual/scientific reasons and not as instrumental in the achievement of religious, cultural, political or other ends. This means, quite simply, that the academic/scientific study of religion must aim only at understanding religion...” (p. 413).

African people do not engage themselves in anything that does not serve a specific purpose. Utility or function is a fundamental dimension of African social life. In Africa, religion is an indispensable social force. Educated Africans may not afford to join their colleagues in the West to study religion purely as an academic exercise, disregarding or ignoring its social functions. Some scholars do not only advocate for a study of religion as an exercise undertaken in, and for itself, but also insists on "decontextualisation" of religion to enhance broad comparative studies. [Mbon \(1991\)](#) has however pointed out the advantages of studying religion within its cultural context: “To study the religion of a people within its milieu and matrix is to study that religion contextually, and the contextual study of any subject necessarily involves history, since history is part and parcel of the context” (p.67).

The gate way to understanding African religion is culture. [Iwe \(1979\)](#) has said that: “Religion and culture are twin, essential, inseparable and interdependent aspects of human life... As religion "vivifies" and illuminates culture, culture gives flesh and substance to religion; as culture incarnates religion, religion redeems and saves culture” (pp.58, 59). This view was affirmed by Eric Sharpe when he said: “... that the greater part of religion is far more culturally conditioned than most believers realise. Where there is of the treasure of religious truth comes in the earthen vessels of culture...” ([Sharpe, 1971](#)). [Mbon \(1991\)](#) avers that if the purpose of studying religion is ultimately to know and understand religion as it really is, it is not advisable to divorce it from culture: “...no ethnologist can deny the fact that an understanding of such cultural constituents as art, architecture, language, and music, can greatly aid an understanding of a people's religion, which itself is one of the major constituents of the culture of the people concerned” (p. 87).

Considering [Tylor \(1889\)](#) definition of culture as "... that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (p. 62), one can infer that the culture-area perspective is the most satisfactory and down-to-earth method of studying African traditional religion. The peculiar

advantage of the culture-area is that it does not stop only at what [Hackett \(1988\)](#) calls "the descriptive phenomenology of traditional beliefs and practices" (p. 48). [Mbon \(1991\)](#) has also observed that the culture-area is best suited for an indigenous scholar because it has methodological advantage "of making available first-hand and first-rate information on the religion of a particular culture area, unhampered by lack of knowledge of both the language and culture of that community, or undistorted by a translator untrained in the techniques of gathering research information" (p. 9).

Religion is a product of culture. It is also a complex cultural phenomenon that is best understood within a specific cultural context. Although religion is a universal human experience, it cannot be said that religious meanings, rituals and phenomenology are the same everywhere. It is culture that creates the variations and for that reason religion is intrinsically culture-bound. [Leonard \(1968\)](#) has said that: "To get a clear and thorough insight into the characteristics and temperament of a people, it is, I think, essential first to obtain a comprehensive grasp of their religion, even before attempting to master their laws and customs" (p. 79).

Since religion is both practical and experiential, an authentic and reliable method should involve participant observation. A situation where some highly reputed scholars sit-tight within the arm-chair of the ivory tower to draw conclusions on sensitive issues is a disservice to scholarship. While agnostic neutrality could serve as a safeguard against value-judgment, participant observation is natural and safe. Phenomenologically, the internal and inner dimension of African religion is ineffable. The outsider who does not understand African culture and world-view will find it difficult, if not impossible, to get to the fundamentals of the people's faith. That was the reason why works by Western anthropologists ended up in a tangential form, far from the reality.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of Africa into international prominence has resulted in increased scholarly attention to its traditional religion and culture. The preoccupation of scholarship has been the task of reconciling the "modern" with the "traditional". The eminent scholar, [Mazrui \(1972\)](#) in his perceptive book, *Cultural Engineering and Nation Building in East Africa* has aptly described the challenge before the African scholar as fourfold: how to indigenize what was foreign; how to idealize what was indigenous; how to nationalize what was sectional or ethnic and how to emphasize what was African (p. 88). Implicit in Mazrui's analysis is the goal to "ancientize and modernize" (1972: p.88).

As a response to this challenge, indigenous African scholars devoted substantial attention to the question of continuities of traditional institutions and cultures despite the corrosive impact of colonial iconoclasm. [Kalu \(1975\)](#) has argued that despite the impact created by the external change agents, "there is a persistence of the traditional core amid change, however revolutionary the

change may be. Elements of continuity exist amid discontinuities..." (p. 58). Studies on Africa should be preoccupied with the quest for identity, politics of self-determination and the need for cultural renaissance.

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