

The High God and Lesser Spirits in African Traditional Religion: A Critical Appraisal of Diverse Theories

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ABSTRACT

Africans were once described as having no religion by some missionaries and Western anthropologists. And even when it was established that the Africans are deeply religious and have had a religion from antiquity, they were again described as having no idea of the Supreme Deity. It is the lesser deities that are close to the people and whom the people trust and worship. Having established the existence of the High God and the lesser deities in Africa, the question has been the nature of the relationship between them in the religious life of the people. Researchers have proposed theories as ways of resolving this problem. This paper looks critically at these theories and has come to the conclusion that the High God in Africa appears to have withdrawn from the life of the people, but that however, the lesser deities are not autonomous beings but messengers of the High God who do his bidding and whom Africans can easily approach following from their social and cultural etiquettes of not approaching the chief directly. The research has also discovered that from the daily experiences of the Africans, the High God is very much around and He is involved in their affairs through social and cultural representations in their daily lives.

Key Words: High God, Lesser Deities, Mediumistic Theory, Ancestors

Introduction

Missionaries and some western anthropologists contended that Africans did not have concept of the High God neither did they have any religion at all. However, these are no longer issues as the mistake has since been corrected. For the Africans, the High God is the creator God or the Supreme Deity. They also believe that next to the Supreme Deity are the lesser gods or subordinate deities and all sorts of spirits.

However, this High God who is considered all-knowing and all powerful does not appear to play important role in the everyday religious life of the people. The role seems to be played by the lesser deities and spirits. He is usually not always directly worshiped; he has no priests, and no shrines dedicated to him, and sacrifices are not offered to him. According to Der (1980: 172):

In accounts of African traditional religions, anthropologists have tended to stress the view that Africans do not sacrifice directly to God but to their ancestors. In sacrifices, whether communal or personal, it is the ancestors who are invoked, and who are called upon to accept the sacrificial offerings. God plays little or no role at all in the communal cults of these religions. Prayers are rarely addressed to him independently and although he is thought to stand behind the ancestors at ritual or religious occasions he is not directly or immediately concerned in sacrifice.

What seems to happen is that the High God has withdrawn from the world and is no longer actively involved in the affairs of the world. He is what is referred to as *Deus otiosus* – a withdrawn God. Sacrifice is therefore rarely and exceptionally offered to him. Giving credence to this stance is that many Africans have stories about God's withdrawal from the world of everyday existence and it is these stories that we turn to now.

Stories of God's Withdrawal from the World of Everyday Existence

- 1. An Ashanti Myth:** According to an Ashanti myth, Onyankopon (God), long, long ago, lived very near to men. His abode was the sky. There was a certain old woman who used to pound her meal of fufu and, whenever she did so, the long pestle she used knocked against Onyankopon, who lived just above in the sky. One day, Onyankopon said: "Because of what you have been doing to me, I am taking myself away far up into the sky where men cannot reach me." So he went up into the sky, and men could no longer approach him. Whereupon the old woman instructed her children to collect all the mortars they could find and pile them one on top of the other. This they did and when they had used all the mortars they could find and pile them, there was only a short distance left, the length of one mortar, to reach Onyankopon. As they could not find another mortar, the women instructed her children to take the bottommost mortar in order to fill up the final gap. They did so, but then, of course, the entire structure went tumbling down and killing many people. Those who survived gave up the attempt to reach the withdrawn God (Busia 1954: 192).
- 2. The Dinka Myth:** The Dinka believe that the sky where Divinity is located and the earth where man dwells, were at one time contiguous, the sky lying just above the earth and being connected to it by a rope, so that men could move at will between the two realms. There was no death and the first man and woman were permitted but a single grain of millet a day, which was all that they at that time required. One day, the woman decided out of greed, to plant more than the permitted grain of millet and in her avid haste and industry accidentally struck the Divinity with the handle of the hoe. Out of annoyance, the divinity cut the rope, withdrew into the distant sky of today, and he left man to labour for his food, to suffer sickness and death, and to experience separation from the source of his being, his creator (Lienhardt 1961: 50-54).

Other authors, some of which include Schebesta (1936) and Evans-Pritchard (1956), have other stories concerning the withdrawal of the High God. There are even some people who make the statement that "God does not need our sacrifice," or God the creator should not be bothered with our problems. Reporting about the Nyakyusa people, Wilson (1959: 164) has this to say concerning this assertion:

Men are preoccupied with their relationships to other living men – their kinsmen, neighbours, and with their death fathers. They are not concerned with their relationship with Kyala. The rituals celebrated by kinsmen are directed to the shades, not to any Supreme God.

This, of course cannot be generalized because there are exceptions. Some African people have a traditional religion in which God is actively worshipped with a cult and priesthood, but it

is true that in a great number of cases this is not the case. In other words, there seems to be contradiction or rather a paradox: although considered to be the greatest and highest being, God seems not to occupy the first place in the religious life of the people. This supports the contention of Taylor (1963) that “There is a contradiction of views here, God is there and not there: a sense of pervading presence but God has withdrawn.”

Also commenting on the seeming contradiction O’Connell (1962) has this to say,

There is an apparent contradiction between the supremacy of the High God and his withdrawal from concern with the world. The attributes assigned to him heighten this effect of contradiction. He is said to be at the origin of things, often as a creator, he is all-knowing and all-powerful, he introduces order into the chaos of the universe, he is the final arbiter of right and wrong ... But in spite of these attributes, the High God is not usually directly worshipped, he has no priests, and no shrines dedicated to him, people may make a token offering to him in every sacrifice, but hardly do they ever offer a sacrifice exclusively to him.

In a similar contradictory slant, the Dinka of southern Sudan have a song which goes as follows: “Great Deng is near, and some say far. O divinity. The creator is near and some say he has not reached us” (Lienhardt 1961: 28). Referring to this nearness of the High God, the Annang of south southern Nigeria has this to say *Awasi ane akpere isong*, meaning, the High God is really close to the earth.

This problem has been tackled by many researchers who enunciate as *Deus absconditus* or *Deus otiosus* (the god who has absconded or a god that has run away). However, it seems that the quotation from the Dinka indicates that the problem is rather that of the transcendence and immanence of God, of maintaining at the same time the transcendent and immanent nature of God. Whatever it may be, various explanations by way of theories have been given to explain the phenomenon which are aimed at resolving the paradox. And this is what we turn to now.

The Theories

1. The Creation Theory

The proponent of this theory is Rafael Pettazzoni. He postulates that the “idleness” of the creator High God, which is the basis for his not being worshipped frequently, arises not so much from his character as supreme being as from his character as a creator. According to him,

Otiositas itself belongs to the essential nature of creative beings and is in a way the complement of their creative activity. The world once made, and the cosmos established, the creator’s work is as good as done. Any more intervention on his part would not only be superfluous, but possibly dangerous, since any change in the cosmos might let it fall back into a chaos (Pettazzoni 1922: 365).

What Pettazzoni seems to say is that creation had been made once and for all by God, and creation being the primary duty of God, it would be superfluous for him to be involved in the affairs of men.

Critical Commentary

What is noticeable in the creation theory is that Pettazzoni is influenced by the traditional western concept of creation, according to which the work of creation ended with the pronouncement of the biblical fiat and the fashioning of man as recorded in the book of genesis. This type of creation story is foreign to the Africans. In fact, in African thought generally creation means a lot more than the traditional western concept would have the Africans to believe. Generally, creation in African thought implies that God having initiated the work of creation continues to bring new existence and to keep them alive. Therefore divine creative power continues to be active in the universe. Hence among African generally, as Ekanem (2015) brings out in his ethnographic report on the Annang of south southern Nigeria, human procreation, for example, is not understood as the result of exclusive mating of a man and a woman but rather as the result of a combined activity of a transcendent creating God and human agents. This assertion by no means denies the procreative function of sexuality. What it means rather is that “in the procreative process there is a metaphysical explanation which must be sought not in man but in God” (see Neckebrouck 1990). Put another way, this means that god is still actively creating even where human beings are involved in pro-creating. This is significantly different from the westerner’s traditional understanding of the process of procreation.

The above position has been corroborated by Wilson (1959: 156) in his ethnographic report on the Nyakyusa people thus:

Lwembe makes a child. I lie with a woman; Lwembe is there, he works. Sometimes, if he is angry he works badly and a leg is missing, or the woman has a miscarriage. Sometimes he works well. Lwembe goes about looking upon the mothers; he is in my bellows (i.e. in my wife). Kyala and Lwembe are together among us and the people of the plain. It is Lwembe who creates twins. You do not. Who has made your body? Who has created you? Who has given you strength so that you are born, and live, and grow up, and marry? It is Lwembe and Kyala together.

There are other examples of God’s ongoing creative intervention in the world. This is explicated in his role in restoring health. It is important to note that for most African peoples, medicines or doctors do not cure. Medicines are just instruments through and by which God restores health. Doctors treat people; they do not cure them; that is the work of God (Wilson 1959: 156, Ekanem 2000: 23-24)).

From the above analysis, we can then safely conclude that God as creator is not really *otiosus* and it seems impossible to apply Pettazzoni’s theory to the African data. Also, as some of the expressions used in the above description of the role of the High God in African traditional religion indicate, the high God is not completely withdrawn; does not play an important role, is usually not directly worshipped. For instance, in times of great calamities affecting the whole ethnic territory or big parts of it, sacrifices are offered directly to the Supreme Being. The sacrifices of ‘the first fruits’ is also sometimes offered to him. He often is the final succor in cases of extreme distress and the ultimate sanctioning of the ethical order is his prerogative. Also, the cult of the Supreme Being persists in very many simple forms which are not always easily observable by people in a hurry or not very attentive. For instance, one has to be an early riser in order to observe how many an African family head begins the day with a small prayer or ritual directed towards the Supreme Being.

Kenyatta (1938: 234-235) describes the role of the high God of the Kikuyu as follows:

The Being thus described [...] is a distant being and takes but little interest in individuals in their daily walks of life. Yet at the crises of their life he is invariably called upon. At birth, initiation, marriage and death of every Kikuyu, communication is established on his behalf with Ngai.[...]every other occasion again is transcended by crises involving the whole tribe, such as a threatened drought. Then of course, Ngai himself must be appealed to.

Obviously, Pettazzoni's theory could only possess any validity if there were no cult to the high God at all.

Apparently, Ikenga-Metuh (1982: 22), without referring to Pettazzoni, comes up with the same idea, with this difference, however, that he attributes the 'withdrawal' to the position of the Supreme Being not only as creator but also as providence. "The Supreme God is not withdrawn because he is ignored by ritual man, but rather because, his position as creator and providence transcends the ritual context. Judging from the above criticism, this seems to be not completely satisfactory. We thus have to look up to another theory.

2. Theory of the Hardship of Life and God's Goodness

Mircea Eliade is the architect of this theory. He gives a double basis for the scant worship given to the Supreme God by the African peoples.

a) For Eliade (1956: 45-55), Africans identify the Supreme Being as the high God. They acknowledge his autonomy, majesty, and primacy, his transcendence. But man easily forgets him as the hardships of life drive him to look more towards earth rather than towards heavens (sky) and he only discovers heaven when he is threatened with death from that direction. Being thus in the sky (symbol of passivity and transcendence), the Supreme Being is in cult substituted for by other religious realities – the divinities and ancestors who are more dynamic, active and easily accessible. Thus man gradually moves away from the Supreme Being, substituting the lesser gods for him and every substitution marks a victory for the dynamic, dramatic forms, so rich in the mythical meaning, over the Supreme Being of the sky God who is exalted but passive and remote. Eliade acknowledges that these people do worship God occasionally and that the scant worship given to God indicates purely and simply that the mass of religious practice is given over to other religious forms. He adds that in no case does it indicate that the Sky God is abstract creation of primitive man or that he has not been able to have any real religious relationship with the sky god.

Critique

The analysis of Eliade shows that the Supreme Being, according to African belief, is not an abstraction, but a person capable of maintaining a personal relationship with man and actually maintaining such a relationship, and he is worshipped, though not frequently. However, Eliade's interpretation does not seem to recognise, or at least does not take seriously the fact that Africans generally look upon the lesser divinities as creatures of God appointed by him to administer certain affairs in the world – a situation which puts God in absolute control, and therefore negates any idea of substitution and victory on the part of the lesser gods.

O'Connell (1962) corroborates this assertion when he contends that "The lesser gods come forward not because they manage to push the High God into the background but because he himself withdraws and leaves the scene to these beings whose nature are known and whose

interventions are predicted.” There is no doubt that God is distant, but he is not by any means pushed away by the lesser gods.

And Idowu (1973: 65) has put forward that God’s distance or transcendence cannot be the basis of the scant worship given to him for if it were so, to be logical, he would not be worshipped at all, since he would be too transcendent for man’s reach (Idowu 1973: 65). We find thus, in Eliade’s contribution an oversimplification on God’s transcendence over and above nearness or immanence which is clearly expressed in God’s personal relationship with man and in the presence of his continued creative activity on earth. What is to be explained is not so much the hidden character of the High God (*Deus absconditus*) and his withdrawal (*Deus otiosus*), but rather the paradox of a God who is at the same time *absconditus* and *otiosus*, and at the same time *revelatus*, revealed in human affairs.

b) According to Eliade (1956: 47-48), God’s goodness is an alternative basis for the scant worship given to him. This is his position:

The Sky God is too distant or too good to need worship properly so called and the African peoples invoke him only in cases of extreme need. ‘Why should we sacrifice to him?’ said the native. ‘We do not need to fear him, for he does not do us any harm, as do the spirits of the dead.’ He is so good and so kind that men have no need of him.

Critique

One does not question the authenticity of the statement in the above quotation, but the interpretation given to it by Eliade is questionable. In fact, Ukpong (1983) has seriously taken up issues with the interpretation. According to Ukpong, the answer given by the informant is in fact not a direct answer to the question “Why do you not sacrifice to God often?” even though that may be the question asked.” The response under consideration merely repeats the information available within the system: that frequent sacrifice is not offered to God; that people do not need to fear God; that God does not do people harm; and that the spirits of the dead can harm people. Ukpong then goes on to assert that to try to understand this as a logical reasoning for not sacrificing to God often is rather hazardous, not because the information is incapable of making a logical statement, but rather because that is not what it is out to do. This has given room for the proposal of another theory, called the Mediumistic Theory.

3. The Mediumistic Theory

Those who propose the Mediumistic Theory hold that even though Africans do not offer sacrifice directly to God or do so only occasionally, all the sacrifices offered to the lesser Gods, the spirits and the ancestors are offered ultimately to God. These beings are therefore intermediaries between God and man: through them man sacrifices to God. God is the ultimate objective of the sacrifice.

The oldest trace of this theory, as far as Africa is concerned, seems to be an article by the Catholic missionary, Oscar Morin (White Father, published in 1909 on the religion of the Kasena of Northern Ghana. According to Morin (1909: 266), sacrifices formed the core of Kasena religious practices and nothing was virtually undertaken without the performance of a sacrifice. These sacrifices, Morin said, were not addressed directly to God but to the ancestors.

Although Morin suggests that the Kasena did not offer sacrifice directly to God, it can be seen from this statement that God had a place in the traditional worship. Prayers and petitions

were addressed to the ancestors, who, in turn, were requested to carry these to God. The ancestors were looked upon as the intermediaries between God and man. The Supreme Being, not the ancestors, was the ultimate receiver of sacrifice.

The role of the ancestors as mediators or intermediaries between God and man was brought out also in the work of another Catholic missionary working in the same area, Father Charles Gagnon. Gagnon (1945: 121) brought out two points from his discussion on sacrifice among the Kasena. First, that the ancestors were used as mediums between God and man; second, that the Kasena sacrificed directly to God as well. He also observed that the ancestors were considered as the agents through whom God bestowed his blessings on men since all good things were thought to come from him. Prayers and sacrifices offered to them were not an end in themselves but as a means to an end. The ancestors were prayed to so that they could, in turn intercede with God for them. They were thus used in much the same way as Catholics employ the saints as a means of reaching God.

Gagnon's work further indicates, as already stated, that the Kasena did not only use the ancestors as mediums as the only method of reaching God, but that they prayed and sacrificed to him directly as well. In Kasena, religion then, God was worshipped indirectly and directly.

The mediumistic theory was also advanced by Daryll Forde and G. I. Jones who were writing about the Ibo and Ibibio people of Nigeria. According to them, the gods are intermediaries between God and man, and God is the ultimate source of sacrifices made to them (Forde & Jones 1950: 25). With Evans-Pritchard's study on the Nuer Religion, published in 1956, the theory became highly popularised. According to Evans-Pritchard (1956), whenever the Nuer prayed or offered sacrifice to the lesser spirits, they prayed or sacrificed to God through them. The lesser spirits are to be regarded as representatives or refractions of God. When praying to any of these spirits, the Nuer are actually addressing God in a particular spiritual figure or manifestation. The Nuer do speak to God directly but they also do speak to him in the figure of a particular spirit depending on whichever mode is most appropriate in the circumstance.

Idowu (1962: 140-147) and Der (1980: 172ff.) have carried the explanations further by establishing a basis of the theory in the people's culture. They argue that the indirect approach to God was determined by the people's norms of social etiquette and had nothing to do with God being inactive in the world. Idowu writes that for the Yoruba, their norms and social etiquette provide that, as a sign of respect, kings, elders and chiefs are not normally approached by members of the younger generation directly with request for favours, but only indirectly through elders in the community. This pattern of thinking was then transferred into the religious context so that God, who is regarded by many African peoples as a king is not approached directly with sacrifice but rather through intermediaries.

Der (1950) writes about the Kasena:

Why was God approached indirectly in Kasena traditional religious worship? The explanation for this is not to be found that fact that God was thought to be so far away from men that he could not be approached directly, as Father Morin would suggest, but rather in the social ethics of the Kasena. In Kasena society, elders and chiefs were held in great respect, and members of the younger generation did not normally approach their elders directly with requests for favours. If a young man wanted some favour to be done to him by an elder, he did not go direct to see the elder concerned with his request but passed it through a

senior member of the society. In much the same way, when a young person offended an elder in a village through some unbecoming or impolite behaviour. He did not ask for pardon directly from the elder but requested another elder to intercede for him. These norms of etiquette were translated into the forms of religious worship. The ancestors were the departed souls of the elders in society who continued to be actively involved in the affairs of their living descendants. Thus it was considered disrespectful to disregard them in prayers and sacrifices offered to God, the creator and master of all things. As pointed out by Fr. Morin the ancestors were also considered as the friends of God and could thus easily influence him to grant the prayers of their living relatives. The indirect approach then to God was determined by social norms and not by the aloofness of God from man.

Newell Booth has added a psychological perspective to this theory, with his psychological explanation of the nature and function of the lesser gods. Booth (1977) argues that these are projections of human needs of God. They are “man made” and represent the attempt to make God concrete and available to man. For, according to Booth, “God cannot be thought of apart from specific manifestations, functions or symbols; neither can he be identified with these,” for he transcends them. This means that any sacrifice offered to the gods is offered to God.

Critique: Justine Ukpog

Justin Ukpog was a priest of the Catholic Diocese of Uyo and Professor of Biblical Theology in the University of Uyo. In an article in 1983, he made some critical remarks to the Mediumistic Theory and proposed his own view about the problem we are dealing with (Ukpog 1983).

First, in its psychological model proposed by Booth, that the gods are a mere fiction of the human mind and therefore has no real existence. To this, Ukpog replies that this goes sharply contrary to the people’s belief that these gods are real beings, creatures of God and really alive and active in the universe. Thus, while the theory is an attempt at explaining man’s preoccupation to concretise to himself transcendent divine action, it does not reflect the experience and aspiration of African peoples for whom these gods have external existence and relevance outside the human mind.

Second, in the sociological model of the theory, which recognises the reality of these gods, Ukpog surmises: either these gods are recognised as free beings capable of initiating actions and carrying them through, and responsible for such actions and therefore meriting praise and blame, or they are mere instruments or channels without free will and responsibility. To say that the gods are both free beings and instruments does not make sense.

The point being made here is, granting that these beings are or can be intermediaries between God and man and man, are they free and responsible intermediaries between men are they mere passive instruments? If they are free and responsible (and most of the authors seem to admit they are) then they deserve to be thanked when they perform well and to be blamed when they perform badly. And sacrifice is one way of thanking them. This means that the

gods ought to be considered not purely as a means to an end but as, at the same time, an end in themselves in some limited sense (Ukpong 1983).

It can be noticed that Ukpong makes two important statements here: a) That sacrifices are always addressed to specific spiritual beings; b) That sometimes the gods and ancestors are explicitly requested to carry sacrifices to God and intercede before God on behalf of man. Ukpong therefore comes to two conclusions: i) If such intermediary function were always implied in every sacrifice to the gods, it would of course be unnecessary to make it explicit sometimes. ii) If sacrifices can be ultimately offered to God, what of those sacrifices that are offered to evil spirits?

Ukpong then comes to express his own views based on his Ibibio research (1982). To understand why few sacrifices are offered to the High God by some African people, he says that we must first of all enquire to what sacrifice means to them and then to see how this meaning affects their relationship with God. He goes on to report that sacrifices are for the Ibibios primarily a means of establishing contact with an invisible world. When offered to God it means an entry into the divine presence. But, being a way of establishing communication with the spiritual beings, it is not reserved for God alone but can be offered to all and any spiritual being when contact with such beings is required. In order to understand why the Ibibio and many other African people do not sacrifice to God frequently, the mediumistic theory, by referring to the etiquette governing the relationship between the king/chief and his subjects in African society, made a step in the right direction. The ordinary subject may not treat the king with familiarity. This demands that the king may not be approached by the ordinary citizen except through an intermediary; that is in the company of an elder. But there is more than that. The social etiquette also demands the king/chief may not be approached or seen often by the ordinary citizen. The mediumistic theory (Idowu, Der) chooses to insist upon the first line of explanation. For Ukpong, the latter offers a more appropriate analogy. Why? The analogy of approaching the king through an intermediary is seen to be appropriate, because, whereas in social life the king is never approached directly, in the religious context sacrifice is sometimes offered directly to God, as the authors who propose the mediumistic theory are forced to admit and to themselves testify. Thus in addition to the reasons Ukpong had already given for rejecting the mediumistic theory, the particular aspect of social etiquette on which that theory is based is seen to be inadequate as well.

The other aspect of African social etiquette on which Ukpong bases his explanation is that the king should not be approached or seen often. Among the Ibibio and many other West African peoples the king/chief appears in public only occasionally and even so is among the Yoruba, often veiled. Generally, it is for these people a mark of respect that the king/chief is not approached often by ordinary citizens. And indeed they do not need to go to him often. Yet this must not be interpreted as a lack of concern on the part of the king/chief for the welfare of his citizens nor as a lack of interest on the part of the people for their king/chief. For the king/chief actually consults with the counselors daily on the welfare of his subjects, and is kept well informed by the different lineage heads of what goes on in the kingdom. The people, too, show a lively interest in carrying out his orders. This, for Ukpong, is a more appropriate analogy for explaining why most West Africans do not sacrifice to God often. Sacrifice means entering into the divine presence. Prayers alone are considered as not sufficiently potent to bring man into the divine presence, "For as the Ibibio say, between God and man there is a ritual fence. In communicating with God through prayer, it is as if one were speaking to God over the fence. In

communicating with God through sacrifice however, the ritual fence is removed and one enters into the presence of God and to do that often is not acceptable.”

4. Cultural-Historical Theories

Most of the theories presented above do not mention, and certainly do not explain, the variations between various African traditional religions in the place they assign to the High God and to the lesser spirits. When we look at two neighbouring East African peoples, the Kikuyu and the Massai, we notice that the religious life of the latter is almost entirely centred upon the cult of the High God, whereas among the former the cult of lesser spirits seems much more developed. Similarly, in the early nineteenth century great differences existed in the cosmologies of the various ethnic groups brought together into the Ndebele state in the Transvaal: Shona, Nguni, Sotho, Tswana, Venda. The differences lie chiefly in the existence or non-existence of a Supreme Being centred cult. The Shona possessed a fairly developed cult centred on the High God *Mwari*, while the other groups, with the exception of the Venda, had their systems of worship revolving around the ancestor spirits. Cultural historical theories seem to be better equipped to deal with such varieties and the proponents are Charles Long and Robin Horton.

a) Charles Long

Charles Long seeks the explanation of the withdrawal of African High God in the religious history of West African people; he links the problem with the process of religious change in Africa (Long 1964). Religious apprehensions and responses occur, he says, and thus the meaning of any religious symbol must be sought in the enhancement and re-evaluation of the history and culture in which it occurs. The problem of the High God presents itself in many religious systems. It cannot be discussed without references to the particular religions and culture. With the help of older existing theories about the cultural history of West Africa, Long constructs the following theory.

He identifies several phases in the cultural history of West African peoples: the Pre-Soil cultivators, probably nomads, succeeded successively by the Old-Hoe culture and finally by the Plough culture. The religion of the nomadic pre-soil cultivators was probably the worship of the Supreme Being as sky-god. Long links the withdrawal of the Sky God with the change in subsistent activities. Thus the prominence of the cult of concrete fertility deities seems to be related to the discovery and diffusion of agriculture in West Africa. In this connection, he finds it interesting to note that the Dinka of the Central Nile basin in the Southern Sudan have a myth which portrays the High God's withdrawal as a result of being hit by a woman's grain pounding pestle (Lienhardt 1961).

Although there is a lot of speculation in Long's paper, it undoubtedly has the merit of pointing to history as the key element in the solution to the problem.

b) Robin Horton

According to the British neo-intellectualist anthropologist Robin Horton (1962, 1970, 1971, 1975), the salient feature of the traditional African religious system is its two-tiered arrangement of unobservables, superhuman beings. In the first tier are found the lesser divinities and spirits, which are in the main concerned with the affairs of the local community and its environment, with what he calls the microcosm. In the second tier we find Supreme Being concerned with the world as a whole, that is, with the macrocosm. Just as the microcosm is part

of the macrocosm, so the Supreme Being is defined as the ultimate controller and external ground of the lesser spirits.

In most areas, the pre-colonial, pre-Islamic and pre-Christian phase is characterized by a rich proliferation of ideas about the lesser spirits and their modes of action. Most events, fortunate or unfortunate, are attributed to their agency. They are thought to underpin and section human morality. There is a wealth of techniques for approaching and manipulating them. On the contrary, ideas about the Supreme Being tend to be thinner and vaguer. Few events are directly attributed to him. He seldom has a direct concern with human morality. Techniques for approaching him are poorly developed. For instance few sacrifices are offered directly to him. The essence of the pre-modern situation is that most events affecting the life of the individual occurs within the microcosmic local community, and that this microcosm is to a considerable extent insulated from the macrocosm of the wider world. Since most significant social interaction occurs within the local community, moral rules tend to apply within this community rather than universally, that is, within the microcosm rather than the macrocosm. Given the association of lesser spirit with microcosm and Supreme Being with macrocosm, it follows from these facts that the former will be credited with direct responsibility for most events of human concern, will be the primary guardians of morality and will be the object of constant approach by human beings, whilst the latter will be credited with direct responsibility few event of human concern, will have no association with morality, and will seldom be by human beings.

Horton then engages in what he calls a thought-experiment.

“The essence of the experiment is that we confront the traditional cosmology with an imaginary set of changes, and use our model of its working to predict its response. The change in question are imaginary rather than actual because they involve certain gross subtraction from historical reality. Thus they involve the introduction of various features of the modern situation minus Islam and Christianity. They involve the massive development of commerce and of nation state without the concomitant influx of Islamic and Christian proselytizers. For our purpose their most important consequences are dramatic improvement in communication, with accompanying economic and political development that override the boundaries between the various microcosm. Such development lure a great many people away from their microcosm and set them down in a wider world. To a greater or lesser extant, they confront even the stay-at-home with a weakening of the boundaries which formerly insulated their various microcosm from this wider world.”

“If thousand of people find themselves outside the microcosm, and if even those left inside see the boundaries weakening if not actually dissolving they can only interpret these change by assuming that the lesser spirit [underpinners of the microcosm] are in retreat, and that the supreme being [underpinner of the microcosm] is taking over direct control of the everyday world. Hence they come to regard the lesser spirit as irrelevant or downright evil. Hence, too, they develop a far more elaborate theory of the Supreme Being and his ways of working in the world, and a battery of new ritual technique for approaching him and directing his influence. As more people become involved in social life beyond the confines of their various microcosms, they begin to evolve a moral code for the governance of this wider life. Since the Supreme Being is already defined as the arbiter of everything that transcends the boundaries of the microcosm, he is seen as underpinning this universalist moral code. From a position of moral neutrality, he moves to one of moral concern.[...] the cult [to the supreme being] is elaborated in response to change.”

“On my premises, the *dues otiosus* should be found where microcosmic boundaries are strong and confining and the more developed doctrine and cult of the supreme being should be found where many social relationship ignore these boundaries.”

Horton’s view of the structure of traditional African religion, together with his thought experiment then, explains not only the *otiositas* of the supreme being in that religion and his return on the scene after the contact with colonial culture, but also the differences between various African traditional religion in the power and functions they assign to the High God and to the lesser spirit.

A Critique of Horton

According to Neckebrouck (1993), Horton’s theory does not come out of the blues. To a certain extent it rephrases M. Wilson’s of “change of scale” in her study on “Religion and the Transformation of Society” (Wilson 1971: 7). In that publication she holds that the religions of the isolated societies (microcosms) of Southern and Eastern Africa have changed as they increased in scale. By change in scale she means a change in the number of people interacting and the closeness of their interaction. One of the changes in religion following change in scale, she notes, is that the Supreme God becomes approachable, that people attribute things to him, which were formally attributed to the ancestral spirits and that sacrifices are offered to him. One could say that the book was published in 1971 and that Wilson and Horton have come independently to the same idea. But together with her husband, M. Wilson had already published another work in 1945, in which we find the same idea (Wilson 1945).

And in her book on Nyakyusa communal rituals of 1959 the same idea is also present (Wilson 1959). Among the Nyakyusa she faced the situation of a people which according to her, were characterized by the lack of any concept of a Supreme Being in the pre-Christian cosmology. And she advanced the idea of a possibility of a connection between the extreme physical and social isolation (closed microcosm) of the Nyakyusa and the lack of any concept of the Supreme Being in their cosmology. But there is more. There exists a manuscript written by a British missionary who died in 1943, on the development of the conception of God in Central Africa (More (1943). The following quotation is from the manuscript:

There is little doubt that a slow transference of allegiance from the spirits to Lesa (God) has been hastened and affected by the practice of migrant labour during recent years. Ancestor worship is to large extent connected with definite localities and definite social systems so that when individual unite migrate the ancestral ties are slackened, and an increased faith in the High God can readily develop. It is certainly a fact that many individuals in urban areas who are isolated from their clan ad relatives show a marked increase in their reliance on God to meet their needs on all occasions.

Undoubtedly, Godfrey Wilson had friendly contacts with this missionary.

Neckebrouck – Beyond Horton

Neckebrouk (1993), while studying the Massai people of East Africa and trying to understand their situation in terms of the Horton hypothesis, noticed the following: Massai religion consists basically of a developed cult of the Supreme Being to which they sacrifice directly. There is no ancestral cult and as a rule, there are no other spirits either. On the other

hand, as a seminomadic people, the Massai had a greater familiarity with and experience of the outside world. In other words, somehow they had already had some kind of experience of settled agricultural peoples around them would only have the with the advent of colonial occupation. That would explain why their religion was characterized by a strong emphasis on the Supreme Being. It would also provide the answer to an old question: while all the surrounding East African peoples had responded very positively to the preaching of the Christian message, why Christian missions had not been able to take foothold among the Massai. The novelty brought by the missionaries, namely a religion centred upon a Supreme Being highly concerned with the events of the everyday world, the Massai had it already. Thus they did not experience any incentive to change. There was no need for them to change as there was in the case of the neighbouring peoples, whose enlarged experience of the outside world was bound to cause changes in a religion up to then centred upon the microcosm. They found in Christianity what they were looking for and thus embraced it. As for the Massai, they had already what it was offering and thus were not in need of it.

However, that is not the end of the story. From the late 1950s on, the Tanzania Massai found themselves invaded by a possession cult (the so called pepo phenomenon. This seems to suggest that the picture of the real spiritual situation is less unilinear than Horton thinks. Especially since the Massai case is far from unique. In many African societies where, according to Horton hypothesis, the High God should now have come into his own as the power related to the wider world, we usually see a jostle of new spirit cults springing up everywhere. Barrington-Ward (1978), for instance, shows that new spirit cults, centred the lesser spirits, emerge among the Isoko and as a matter of fact, also among other African peoples. The domination of the High God at the cost of the lesser spirits has not arrived. Barrington-Ward does not hesitate to dismiss Horton's much quoted paper as "pure speculation."

It seems to me that we should not go to that extreme, even though the facts are undeniable, it does not necessarily mean imply that everything is wrong with the picture drawn by Horton. However, it seems to indicate that something is wrong with it, or at least that it should be nuanced or completed by other insights. The scheme fits many facts, although not all of them. The objection has been aptly summarised by Fisher (1973: 47-48). He contends that the evidence suggests that "when the microcosm really begins to go to pieces, and the microcosm to thrust itself upon us, we may more easily find a strengthening of witch-finding, and other such practices," then an enhanced respect for the creator. What this means is that there should be a search for a more encompassing theory.

Ikenga-Metu (1955: 48), reporting on the cult of the Supreme Being among the Igbo and the Yoruba also arrives at the same conclusion. Considering the religious history of both peoples throughout pre-colonial and colonial history, the author shows that Igbo and Yoruba were similarly exposed to the influences of the macrocosm. The Supreme Being (Chukwu) had always been an important factor Igbo cosmology, although major developments in his cult came at points in Igbo history when, and in communities which were most exposed to the influence of the macrocosm. The *otiose* High God was brought into lay to cope with rapid changes which exposed people living in microscopic rural communities to the influences of the wider world. Unlike in Igbo culture, the cult of the Supreme Being (Olodumare) was never a prominent feature of Yoruba religion. From the beginning the worship of the lesser deities (orisha) was at the very basis of Yoruba culture. When the macrocosm thrust itself increasingly upon the Yoruba during the period of their occupation and settlement in the present Yoruba country, what we witness is an expansion of the Yoruba pantheon and a further withdrawal of the Supreme

Being. Contacts and conflicts with Muslims coming from the north intensified by the 18th and 19th centuries and left a remarkable imprint on Yoruba religion and culture. Yoruba traditionalists resisted Islam and the Muslim invaders with vehemence. Orisha worship entered into conflict with monotheistic Islam. It was therefore at the basis of Yoruba culture and nationalism. So the Yoruba remained attached to Orisha cults mainly because of politico-nationalistic feelings. The history of the Yoruba became one of long and bitter conflict with Islam. Orisha cult provided a focus of Yoruba unity of purpose – their opposition to Muslim aggression. In other words, religious belief may have other functions than that of explanation, prediction and control of space-time events (Horton). Yoruba cultural history shows that a more physical exposure to the macrocosm is not enough to generate the process of rationalization. Exposure to the macrocosm does not *ipso facto* result in a macroscopic view. Physical exposure to the macrocosm must be accompanied by some degree of psychological receptivity to change, for other factors may be at work which may build up a psychological resistance to change. Ikenga-Metu's finding is one example of how the Horton hypothesis might be nuanced and completed. It is obvious that, in other cases, other historical or cultural elements than those considered by the author in the Yoruba case, might be relevant. To bring this to light is the work of the next researcher.

Summary and Conclusion

It has been established beyond reasonable doubt that the Africans have their religion and also that the existence of the High God is not in doubt even though He appears not to play an important part in the life of the people since he seems to be withdrawn. It is for this reason that the ancestors and the lesser deities appear to have more prominent roles in the life of the Africans than the High God.

It has also been established that there are various theories put forward by academicians and religious experts to explain the seeming withdrawal of the High God as well as explaining the place of the High God, the lesser spirits and the ancestors in the day to day religious lives of the African people. This paper has extensively and critically analysed the various theories and then comes out with the following conclusions:

1. Undoubtedly, the High God appears to have withdrawn from the people. The fact, however, is that the lesser gods and the ancestors are mediators and intermediaries between the people and the High God. The lesser beings thus are not independent beings that push the High God away and take over proceedings but rather they are creatures of God who work directly under Him.
2. Even though sacrifices are often offered to the lesser gods, these sacrifices are ultimately offered to the High God and the Africans from time to time do offer sacrifices directly to the High God.
3. The relationship between Africans and the High God is highly anthropomorphic in nature. They approach the High God just in the same manner that they approach their chiefs and kings with differential distance, through his counselors, and in the religious sense, through the lesser gods and the ancestors. And the affairs of the people are not hidden from the High God as He knows what is happening every second through the intermediaries who report directly to him.

4. The research has also given reason to the conclusion that from the daily experiences of the Africans, the High God is very much around and He is involved in their lives through their everyday social and cultural representations.

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