

AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION IN AFRICAN AND AFRICAN DIASPORA SCHOLARSHIP

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Abstract

Scholars of African Traditional Religion (ATR) have addressed some challenges which are associated with the study of religion such as ATR, which is dynamic, multi-cultural, multi-lingual, has varieties, and entertains secret-sacred. These challenges include the non-availability of written sacred scripture, the issue of appropriate name for the belief system of the Africans due to the varieties of African traditions, how to straighten out the faulty notions of the 'colonial scholars' of ATR, and the felicitous methods to be adopted in the study of the religion amongst others. Scholars of ATR in African and African diaspora have carried out studies to discuss and reveal the original state, content and nature of ATR, but the extent of their scholarly activities on ATR had not been considerably appraised by scholars. Consequently, this chapter was predicated on the dearth of studies that consider the activities and efforts of African scholars on ATR within and outside the border of Africa. The study, therefore, aims at examining the views of African scholars on ATR. Historical and descriptive methods were used for this study to gather and present data through existing literature of African scholars. It was discovered that there are some areas of study that need to be addressed by African scholars on ATR, and need for constant study due to the dynamic nature of the religion was identified. The study recommended that journal of ATR and association of the study or scholars of ATR should be created for research visibility and inter-connectivity or networking in Africa and the Diaspora.

Introduction

This chapter examines the works of some African scholars on some issues such as no written scripture, the right name for the indigenous African belief system, appropriate methods for the study of the religion, and the evolutionary stages of ATR. The second sub-heading discusses some peculiar issues in African Diaspora scholarship of ATR. The chapter uses more instances from Yoruba belief system than other cultures. It is germane to state that the African scholars of ATR in Africa and the Diaspora have contributed to the resuscitation and globalization of ATR through research publications, meaning that the religion is not a subject of study for only the Europeans. Hence, this chapter considers some of these publications as they pertain to the issues cited earlier.

African Traditional Religion in African Scholarship

Sacred scripture is a key source of reference for religious knowledge and the study of religion, but ATR has no written sacred scripture. Mbiti¹ identifies this as one of the challenges that makes the study of ATR difficult. The lack of any written scripture makes it worthwhile for scholars to study ATR epistemologically through existing literature and ontologically through fieldworks, because in the first place, all human history started from oral traditions. Hence, oral traditions are “the only means of knowing anything at all of the peoples’ interpretation of the universe and the supersensible world, and what they think and believe about the relationship between the two.”² In turn, it means that the religion should be studied by studying the adherents of the religion. ATR, according to Jonathan and Mtata³ “is not only oral in its orientation; it is essentially performative and communal.” The written scripture depends on human beings to perform what is written in it through communal existence and ritual expressions in the society.

The performance or expression exists in dance, songs, sound of drums, hunting, farming, trading, and traditional leadership patterns, expressions of myths, proverbs, eulogies, adages, arts and crafts, riddles, wise sayings, symbols and emblems in sacred spots, paintings, moldings, carvings, sculptures, and indigenous names of people. These are the sources of information on, or means to study ATR. The performative styles of the oral traditions are passed from one generation to another to ensure their continuity, but by implication, the oration of ATR points to the fluidity and non-static nature of the religion. But the unavailability of sacred scripture is still an issue in the study of ATR. It is commendable that African scholars of ATR acknowledge that the religion has no written sacred scripture, and they have supplied ways of knowing the religion, but mainly, they are yet to state why there is no written scripture for the religion which people can easily consult. Critical minds will like to know may be the fact that the religion has no written scripture is premised on the reality that the religion has no founder, or is it because of the religious varieties, existence of many languages, traditions, and cultures? Is it a command from God that there should not be any written scripture, or Africans depend solely on oration, or they are not lettered; even in their indigenous language, or they do not see the need for it?

The varieties of indigenous religious forms, languages and traditions in Africa may make the writing of a single sacred scripture difficult. This can be overcome by applying culture area style postulated by Mbon⁴ as a viable method to approach the study of ATR. This approach requires each African scholar of ATR to concentrate or study a particular locality due to the vastness of the African society and to avoid over-generalization. The aspect of methodology, as discussed by African scholars will be highlighted later, but with regard to the questions above, it appears to us that many localities in Africa do not see the need for any written document before now, and this makes African traditions to be easily eroded by westernization and foreign