

The Heritage Of The Mouth: Oral Sources And The Study Of African Traditional Religion

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ABSTRACT: This paper primarily addresses the controversy among scholars on whether oral traditions such as myths, songs, wise sayings, incantations, invocations, legends, etc. constitute sources to understanding African traditional religion. The paper attempts to demonstrate the vast potentials of oral tradition as a vehicular access to understanding African beliefs and practices. It then highlights the urgent need, in the face of a rapidly changing world, where values are shifting fast, to document for posterity a religion whose tenets have been seriously battered by agents of modern change.

I. INTRODUCTION

African Indigenous religion is unlike other world religions in very many respects. It has no historical founder, it is not a missionary religion *per se*: there is no messianic expectation or apocalyptic warnings of the end of the world (see J. S. Mbiti, 1969: 5; J. O. Awolalu, 1976: 275). Most importantly, for our purpose here, there are no sacred scriptures or written literature of any kind. The religion is largely oral and its beliefs and practices are preserved in the memory of living persons – cultic functionaries, elders, opinion leaders and other custodians of cultural and religious traditions – and passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation. This feature of African indigenous religion has left it much disadvantaged, exposing most of its doctrines and dogmas to “additions and subtractions, modifications and distortions, exaggerations and confusions, so that it is difficult to separate the truth from the fiction” (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979: 29).

In spite of this handicap, in the context of African studies, African indigenous religion, unlike many related disciplines, was quick to attract scholars’ attention. The interest, obviously, was sparked off by British Colonial Policy and missionary interest. Most of the field research officers, social anthropologists and ethnographers were commissioned agents of colonial governments charged with the gathering of vital intelligence reports amongst which were the beliefs and values of the so called natives to aid effective colonial occupation (see C. I. Ejizu, 1989: 1, G.I.K Tasié, 2006: 94). As for the missionaries, their interest was to paint a picture of a dark continent where devil reigns supreme and how they were able to bring light to such a benighted people (Tasié, 2006: 94).

Such was the benefit of the indigenous religion, so that by the eve of independence, especially in the case of Nigeria, there was a flurry of works, with some chapters devoted to some aspects of the indigenous religion, by such notable pioneers as Major A. G. Leonard, Percy A. Talbot, Northcote W. Thomas, Herbert .F. Mathew, C. K. Meek, M. D. W. Jeffreys, D. Forde, G. I. Jones, etc. One major gain of these writers lies in their methodology of participant field observation and the use of oral sources.

For a sister discipline like history, especially in its formative years in African studies, there seems to be a difference to which the historian uses oral tradition. Robert Lowie had once declared, “I cannot attach to oral tradition any historical value whatsoever under any conditions whatsoever” (Robert Lowie in D. F. Mc Call, 1969: 47). And for the likes of Lord Raglar, history is impossible without literacy. For him, only when events can be written down will history develop because otherwise, the succeeding generations forget because they have no interest. History is a clerkly profession (Lord R. in Mc Call, 1969: 47). In a worthy response, Daniel F. Mc Call dismisses this as an extremely dubious line of reasoning, drawing attention to the ‘griots and remembrancers which help to authentic oral traditions’ (1969: 47).

The preoccupation of early writers in this field, as Ejizu has pointed out, was first to expend considerable energy and ink to reply and try to convince doubting Thomases of the worth and crucial significance of oral traditions and prototype testimonies in the historiographical reconstruction of Africa’s past (1989: 37). Having adequately replied cynics on the importance of “The internal evidence of oral data” (Enemugwen and Okere 2008: 194) in reconstructing the past, African history-writing has today blossomed and there is now in place an adequate historiography in handling oral traditions.

For African indigenous religion, scholars have been rather very slow, in developing an adequate methodological frame work, peculiar to the discipline, in harnessing the rich oral traditions, which still remain largely our main sources of information on the religion. Until very recently, scholars seemed to be preoccupied with the debate on whether oral data from a particular culture group could be used with any justification as typical for the whole of Africa. It was perhaps, in search for adequate methodology that C. I. Ejizu came up with

“Methodological Issues and Perspectives in the Study of Igbo Religion” (1988). In it, Ejizu laments the trend which has become a common feature in scholarship in African traditional religion. As he puts it: “They (scholars) easily generalized from scanty evidence they got from their own individual experiences and from poorly informed interpreters” (1988: 71). Against this background, he prescribes for Igbo religion, the necessity of utilizing an inclusive method, for example, the type of approach adopted in oral historiography, for collecting useful data for the systematic study of the subject. In his subsequent essay, “Oral Sources in the Study of African Indigenous Religion” (1989), Ejizu berates scholars of African indigenous religion, who according to him, now tend to depend more on secondary sources seem unaware of the vast potentials of oral materials as well as their implications for methodology in the subject (1989: 38).

The need for this paper is not on methodology as such, rather to draw attention on the controversy among scholars on whether oral traditions such as myths, proverbs, songs, riddles etc. constitute sources to understanding African belief system, values and norms. On one hand, are scholars such as Mbiti (1969), Idowu (1973), Awolalu and Dopamu (1979), Ejizu (1988), etc., who are of strong conviction that a study of oral traditions would provide a deep insight into African belief system. On the other hand, Okot p’ Bitek exemplifies the school of thought which vehemently does not see any religious significance, whatsoever, in oral traditions. On myths as a source of information on African traditional religion p’ Bitek dismisses it thus, “The first thing to note is that the stories that have been collected and labeled ‘myths of origin’ have no religious significance. They do not form any part of religious activity; and although a few of them may be described as poetic discussions of how things came to be as they are, the vast majority of them are ordinary moral tales”. On riddles, p’ Bitek rhetorically asked: “How could anybody learn about a people’s religion by studying their riddles”? As for proverbs, he dismisses as barren; and pity sentences for him are no more than social commentaries and teachings (1970: 63- 4).

The main thrust of this paper is to show the vast potentials of oral tradition as a vehicular access to understanding African beliefs and practices, values and mores. In what follows, I shall be examining these oral traditions, drawing out their relevance to the study of African indigenous religion.

II. MYTHS

Myth is a derivation of the Greek word *muthos*, implying, in a very broad sense, anything delivered by word of mouth, ‘speech’, ‘conversations’, implying the subject of the conversation, ‘the matter itself’ (see Liddell and Scott, 1909). Scholarly distinction, however, shows that not every oral tradition is myth. Myth, for example, is distinct from other forms of oral literature such as fairy tales and fables in two ways. First, a myth is understood in its own society as a true story. The conception among scholars prior to the 19th century that myth is ‘fable’, ‘invention’ or ‘fiction’ has long been discarded.

Nowadays, scholars, as Mircea Eliade (1963: 1) rightly pointed out, have accepted myth as it was understood in the archaic societies where it means a ‘true story’ and beyond that a story that is a most precious possession because it is sacred, exemplary and significant. In line with Eliade, myth has been defined as stories told as symbols of fundamental truth within societies having a strong oral tradition (see *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2006:716). The second distinguishing character of myth is that it achieves comprehensiveness and ultimacy, because it refers its society back to primordial reality, which is not merely prior in time but is a qualitatively different time and mode of being. Thus myth, unlike the fairy tale formula: “once upon a time”, which indicates that time is loosely constructed without particular significance begins with the formula: “In the beginning”, meaning that particular different time before the present state of affairs (cf. *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2006:716).

Myth is a very common feature of African indigenous religion. It is an important means of expression through which man’s experiences and encounters with the supersensible world is revealed. Myth provides answers for a student of African traditional region seeking interpretations to such fundamental and cardinal questions of life as the origin of man, the original state of man, the fall of man, the phenomenon of death, the problem of evil, life in the after-life, etc. Thus Africans through their encounters with the universe evolved their own indigenous myths explaining and interpreting African beliefs concerning questions of fundamental importance as enumerated above. Accordingly, there are cosmological myths, for example, found all over Africa, concerned with the creation of the cosmos, after which, man was created to take charge of the created order. For the Yoruba, it was Olodumare, the Supreme Deity, who commissioned and delegated Orisa – nla, the arch divinity, to perform this task (Idowu, 1962). In Edocosmological account, Osanobuwa, the Supreme Deity, assigned two divinities, Osanowa and Osanoha, to carry out this responsibility. Osanowa was commissioned to create man; while Osanoha was delegated to create animals of the bush (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979).

One version of Igbo cosmological myth has it that Chukwu, the Supreme Deity, mandated Eri, a superhuman, to accomplish this assignment. When Eri and his wife descended from heaven, they landed at Aguleri; but unfortunately, the whole place was marshy, so they stood on a termite mound. Eri complained to Chukwu who sent Awka, a blacksmith, with bellows, charcoal and fire to dry up the land. In the life time of Eri, he and his dependents were fed by Chukwu with a certain sky-substance, but those who ate of this food never

slept. At the demise of Eri, the food supply ceased. Then Nri, Eri'sson, complained to Chukwu about the shortage of food. Chukwu, however, replied that food would be available on one condition, only if Nri would slay and bury his son and daughter, food would be obtained from their graves. After initial doubts, Nri complied. Three Igbo weeks later, plant shoots appeared from their graves. From the grave of his son, Nri dug up yam, cooked and ate it with his family and for the first time they fell asleep. Also from his grave sprang up palm tree. The next day Nri dug up cocoyam from his daughter's grave; they ate it and likewise slept. Thus yam, which is regarded as the king of crops, is planted by men, and it is abomination against the land for women to climb palm tree, and worse still, tap the wine.

Chukwu told Nri to distribute this food to all mankind. Nri objected, saying that it was obtained by the death of his first born children. Chukwu insisted and promised that in return, Nri and his descendants would have the right of cleansing every Igbo town of abomination or breaches of taboo. They would also have the right of crowning the king of the children of Eri and tying the ankle cords whenever a man took the *ozotitle*. Nri and his descendants would also have the right to make the yam medicine each year to ensure bountiful harvest (see M. D. W. Jeffrey, 1956: 119- 131).

This Igbo myth, apart from accounting for the creation of the cosmos, also validates and legitimizes important Igbo cultural practices and social institutions. Thus the myth attempts to account for why today the Awka among the Igbo are considered excellent blacksmith and why blacksmithing has become the major occupation of the adult male residents of Akwa town. Similarly, the myth tries to legitimize occupational roles and functions ascribed according to gender. Thus, men must cultivate yam and tap palm wine because they are masculine, originating from the remains of Nri'sson. On the contrary, the cultivation of cocoyam and vegetable is the exclusive preserve of women because they sprang up from the grave of Nri's daughter. Most importantly, the myth legitimizes the religio-political claim of hegemony of the Nri people over the rest of Igboland.

Generally, African cosmological myths place the creation of the universe and all therein not directly in the hands of the Supreme Deity but rather creation are delegated to a being or set of beings of an intermediate character. Secondly, creation as conceived by many African people is not *ex – nihilo*, out of nothing. Awolalu and Dopamu (1979: 65) have attempted an explanation to these two common features of African cosmological myths. On the former, they argue that man's reflection and expression about the supersensible world goes from the known to the unknown. In the light of this, they pointed out that man's expression about the unknown world has a sociological frame work and as such, sociological pattern which is known to man, gives structure and a conceptualization to a theological formulation. On the latter, Awolalu and Dopamu expostulate that to Africans, the idea of creating *ex- nihilo* is too abstract and too academic to satisfy human spiritual mind.

As regards myths dealing with the original state of man, and God's provision for man and how man subsequently lost this provision, Africans have various theological formulations. Some, like the Ashanti, believe that in the beginning God lived in the sky, but close to man. The mother of these men constantly went knocking against Him with her pestle while pounding the traditional food, *fufu*. In anger God moved up higher. The woman instructed her sons to gather all the mortars, place them one on the other and follow God. This they did, but before they could reach Him, they ran short of construction material. As there was a gap of only one mortar, she advised her children to take the bottom most mortar in order to fill up the gap. Obediently they did this, only to cause the whole tower to tumble down and kill many of them. The survivors gave up the idea of following God up there (see K. A. Busia in D. Forde, 1954: 192).

In other cultures, particularly among the Efik, Obasi, God, created the two world parents, Etejeji and Etaban. They lived blissfully with God in heaven attending to God's farm. They were to serve God for seven years after which God promised to make them rich, however, in the last week of the seventh year, Etaban without the knowledge of her husband, stole some seed yams belonging to Obasi. Obasi was so displeased that He sent them out of the farm to the earth. However, out of pity for the couple, He gave them plenty of yams to cultivate in order to feed themselves and their children (B. A. Banuka, 1999: 92).

These myths attempt to account for African own idea of paradise and how it was eventually lost by the primaeval man. Accordingly, African image of the happy life as Mbiti (1969: 98), has adequately described it, is one in which God is among the people, His presence supplying them with food, shelter, peace, immortality or gift of resurrection and a moral code. However, this paradisaical relationship was brought to an end as a result of man's disobedience and breach of the moral code.

The appearance of death, its uncanny and intriguing nature, is also subject of many African myths. The origin of death is variously ascribed to a falsified message or slackness of a lower creature, and in other instances, death originated when the people made an unwise choice; choosing a large bundle of tempting articles instead of small bundle that contained everlasting life.

Thus, according to the Isiokpo, for example, in the beginning God sent the dog to the mythical ancestors with the message that they would be immortal, but sent the toad with the contrary message that they would die. The dog not only sauntered on the way but stopped at different places to feed on excrement. As a result, the toad arrived first and delivered its message. No sooner had the toad delivered its message than the dog

arrived. However, God had already sanctioned the message delivered by the toad, and ever since death has been the lot of man. That a toad was the harbinger of the evil message has earned it contemptuous and scornful treatment. In Isiokpo, the animal must be killed whenever sighted with causes and abuses (see Tasie, 1999: 71).

The authenticity and reliability of myth, as a source of oral tradition, can be attested to, since in many African cultures, it relates to supernatural things and as such, it is revered and surrounded with sanctions against distortion and falsification. In many African cultures, it is the prerogative of priests to recite it to a select audience during rituals and festivals. Very remarkably, J. H. Enemugwen has enumerated some mnemonic devices that help the priest to recite it correctly. These are drum beats, specific dance steps, specific movements on the sacred ground and the sequence of recitations. The priest, as Enemugwen further noted, sometimes starts by relating the people to their homelands, migratory routes and the events at each place of migration before pointing to their religious life and early history of their past settlement traditions. Some prefer chanting their recitation with a defined metre to ensure accuracy (Enemugwen, 2008: 80- 81).

Most importantly, in cultures where myth is used as a magical incantation in healing, renewal and inspiration, it is recited with much care because alteration and distortion may render the whole ritual process worthless and ineffective. To guide against this, the priest usually adheres strictly to the wording of the myth, in order not to jeopardize the life of the devotees.

Myth, therefore, is an invaluable asset to the study of African indigenous religion. Indeed, in African traditional societies, myth and religion are often inextricably intermingled and used in the natural ordering of things; and most significantly, assist man to explain reality. For it is through myth that the inexplicable realities of the world in which Africans live are disentangled, revealed and made real to them. Therefore, myth, for the African, is a symbolic expression of a religious experience, which becomes the model for explaining and interpreting the universe and all that exist in it.

Songs

Songs constitute another very significant source of African indigenous religion. In African traditional societies, song occupies a central place and Africans employ it for every occasion: be it joy or sorrow. Songs are used to buoy up warriors during wars, to extol the virtues of rulers, to assuage the bereaved, to rejoice with merry-makers, and very importantly, for our purpose here, songs are employed most extensively in religious rituals, festivals, births and funeral ceremonies. Songs as veritable instruments to the study and understanding of African indigenous religion have been emphasized by Idowu. For him: "When they (songs) are connected with rituals, they convey the faith of worshippers from the heart - faith in Deity, belief in and about divinities, assurances and hopes about the present and with regard to the hereafter. In each people's songs; there is a wealth of materials for the scholar who will patiently sift and collate" (1973: 85). Thus in songs, as Awolalu and Dopamu have revealed, the people's doctrinal and philosophical outlook is expressed (1979: 31).

One very significant aspect of African indigenous religion that has become very controversial is the place and nature of the Supreme Being. Early investigators in this field of study variously described the Supreme Being as conceived by Africans as *deus absconditus* (absconded god), *deus remotus* (remote god), *deus otiosus* (idle god), etc. in a bid not only to ridicule the religion but to show that the Supreme Being as conceived by Africans may not exactly be the same with the West. This is attested to in the words of Emile Ludwig: "How can the untutored Africans conceive God? Deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing" (see Smith, 1950: 10). African scholars have adequately replied Emile Ludwig and his likes that the Supreme Being is not a stranger to the continent.

To do this, however, it appears that African scholars have drawn inspiration largely from African songs which are replete with what Africans think about Deity and the supersensible world. In many African cultures, the belief that God is creator of all things including the divinities is implicit and unequivocal. Take for example, the Akan title for Nyame, the Supreme Being, *Bore bore*, which means Excavator, Hewer, Carver, Creator, Originator, Inventor or Architect. The Akan also call Nyame, Odomankoma, meaning the author of all things and they regard the divinities as the children of Nyame, symbolizing that their origin and existence is dependent on Him. That God is creator among the Akan strongly finds credence in one drum stanza which goes as follows:

Odomankoma, He created the thing.

'Hewer- out' Creator, He created the thing

What did He create? He created order

He created knowledge, He created death

As its quintessence (J. B. Danquah, 1944:70).

Apart from His position as creator, Africans also conceive God as faraway and at the same time transcendent. This, however, does not in any way imply withdrawn, remote/absconded, rather it suggests that God goes beyond the limit of human knowledge, experience and reason and faraway to the point that man cannot touch and feel Him, in a physical sense. Yet this "faraway" God is immanent and so close that He hears and sees everyone. The transcendence and immanence nature of God is best illustrated in the Nupesong:

God is far away
God is in front
He is in the back (Smith, E. W. 1950: 249).

One other aspect of Deity is what Africans themselves think of their relationship with Him. All over Africa, people consider Him to be benevolent, morally good and care about humans. He is responsible for the creation and maintenance of the world. Yet, paradoxically, in some African cultures, as Ronald M. Green observes, He is cast in a morally unfavourable light. When God enters human affairs, it is often to cause evils and sometimes epidemics, death by wild animals, lightning and other random events that defy moral explanation (1988: 23). The Yoruba, for example, consider death by lightning and small pox as royal punishments (i.e. manifesting the wraths of God) (see Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979: 84- 5). This spirit of fatalism is re-enacted in a Dimkahymn which vividly expresses the same attitude.

Spring rain in a dry spell, strikes the ant on the head with a club.
And the ant says: my father has seen
And they do not know whether he helps people, and they do not
know whether he injures people (Green 1988: 23).

Like the Supreme Being, Africans also believe that spirits are ubiquitous, and can be found everywhere. This is particularly expressed in the Nuer concept of *deng*, regarded as the greatest of the spirits of the air. A man says he is tired of the demands made by *deng* and that he would move. But *deng*, in a song replies:

A man avoiding *deng*
Will find *deng* in front
On the right he will find *deng*
On the left he will find *deng*
Behind him he will find *deng*
(E. E. Evans-Pritchard, 1956: 47).

African indigenous religion is utilitarian; apart from satisfying human spiritual needs, the religion is also concerned with the good life here and now, and with health and prosperity. Man's position in the society is validated through personal achievements. From cradle to grave, life is bedeviled with obstacles which man must eliminate through personal struggles to actualize his destiny. Most times man enlists the support of certain spirit forces to actualize this. For the Igbo, this spirit force is *chi*; among the Edo, it is *uhunmwa*; for the Idoma, it is *owo*; the Nupe refer to it as *kuci*; and among the Yoruba, it is known as *ori*.

The Yoruba has a very interesting account on how man chooses his destiny. They believe that a man's life course is predestined by Olodumare, the Supreme Deity, and it is conferred on man in one of three ways. Man knells down before Deity to receive or choose or have his destiny affix on him. This is carried out in the presence of *ori*, man's guardian angel and Orunmila, the oracle divinity. On his way into the world, precisely at the gate between heaven and earth, *Onibodeorun* (the heaven's gatekeeper) would ask man to declare his destiny again. When once this is done, the destiny is finally sealed and man is born into the world. A Yoruba popular song supports the belief that destiny once sealed before Deity is unalterable.

That-which-is chosen knelling,
It is that-which-is-found-getting-to the world, Destiny cannot be
altered. (Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979:162).

Another lyric popularized by the Yoruba talking drum is:

Whatever a spendthrift likes, He buys with his money
Hold your tongue still, give us peace!
Whatever the *ori* comes to fulfill, it cannot but fulfill it (Awolalu
and Dopamu, 1979: 162).

That Orunmila, outside the Supreme Being, has the inexhaustible knowledge about creation and knows the destiny of every individual has earned it the appellation *Eleri- ipin* (the destiny witness). Although, Orunmila knows man's destiny, it is *isori*, the guardian angel, who has the monopoly to govern, control and guide the individual through life's earthy journey. Accordingly, it is necessary for the individual to offer *orin* necessary sacrifices to curry its favour. Obedience in this regard will earn him favourable predestined future. It is perhaps, in realization of this, that man in a Yoruba song asked Orunmila, the wise one:

Who among the gods shall we propitiate with sacrifice?
We shall make haste and offer sacrifice to Eegun cult.
Orinmila said: he is not a worthy god to be propitiated with
sacrifice
They said we should desist from giving preference to *ori*
Instead recognition should be given to Orisaoja.

Orunmilasaid:he is not worthy to be offered sacrifice.
They answered; we shall make a round cloth to carry sacrifice
Prepared for witches to the cross road.
Orunmila said: they are not worthy to be offered sacrifices.
Orunmila, I confess my ignorance, blessed, cloth me with wisdom,
enlighten me
Orunmilasaid, it is *orialone*
That is worthy to be offered sacrifice
(AdegboyaOrangun, 1988: 37).

The above, succinctly captures the importance of *ori*(especially as declared by Orunmila, the wise one), as one who is to be propitiated to actualize a favourabledestiny and as one who can appeal to Olodumare to mend unfavourable destiny.

Also very remarkable as sources of African indigenous religion are birth songs. Some of the birth songs give thanks and extol the Supreme Being as the Giver of children; others, marvel at the mystery of child birth, and yet others, ask rhetorical questions, as to what should be given to God in appreciation for His gift of children. Take, for example, this Igbo birth song:

If God were not the giver of children
Who would have given me a child?
If God were not the giver of children
Who would have given me a child?
(C. O Okechukwu. 2007: 133).

This song draws attention to a very important Igbo belief, namely:that God is the Source Being from whom other beings came into existence. He is the giver of children. Another Igbo birth song, also reported by Okechukwu (2007: 133) goes as follows:

Women, our members
God that gives children,
What shall we give Him?
Iyaae, Iyaae
A child is superior to money (Okechukwu 2007: 133).

In this song, as Okechukwu attempts to interpret, the women raise a question which emphasized God as the sole giver of children and so deserves something in appreciation. In response to the question, the women do not provide an answer (and no answer was expected for the question was merely rhetorical), but rather, they sing that a child is worth more than money. By this response, as Okechukwupoints out, the women make two important points, namely; that child is very valuable (more valuable than money), and secondly, that no gift to God would be enough to repay for the gift of a child. By emphasizing that a child is superior to money they imply that even if it were possible to offer money to God, it would not be a worthy gift in comparison to the baby they had received from Him.

Another aspect of African song that is rich in African beliefs and philosophy are funeral dirges. Some of the dirges may dwell on the irreversibility of death; the helplessness of man in the hands of death; the transitory nature of man on earth, and most importantly, the abode of the dead. Typical of such dirges is this one which depicts the struggle between man and death.

Behold Oteka fights alone
The Bull dies alone.
O men of the lineage of Awic
What has the son of my mother done to you?
That he should be deserted
Behold the warrior fights single handed
My brother is armed with bow and barbed-headed arrows
He fights alone, not a single helper beside him
My brother fights alone, he struggles with death (p' Bitek1963:
20).

The dirge reveals that when God decrees death for the individual he struggles in vain. And this clearly exemplifies the Isiokpo saying: sacrifice does not prevent death(Tasie, 1999: 187).

In all, we see that songs are at the heart of African religion. Through the songs that are used in worship we learn about the names and characters of Deity and or the divinities, the wishes and yearnings of the worshippers and some basic doctrinal issues.

III. PROVERBS, ADAGES, IDIOMS AND OTHER WISE SAYINGS

Africans through interactions with their environment, and from human experiences and reflections have come up with well known phrases and sentences that give advice or say something that is generally true. Infact, these forms of oral tradition, collectively referred to as wise sayings, are important means of communication in traditional Africa. Among the Igbo, Chinua Achebe (1958), for example, tells us that proverbs are the oil with which the Igbo eat their words. But most remarkably, proverbs also communicate religious truth and are important vehicles through which fundamental religious lessons are conveyed. E. Ikenga-Metuh has provided a catalogue of religious beliefs as they are found and expressed in Igbo proverbs (1985).

The profound fatalism, the belief that events are decided by fate and that you cannot control them, prevalent in African religion, is strongly expressed in wise sayings. The Mende, in a few well chosen words, express this belief in a proverb: If God dishes your rice in a basket, do not wish to eat soup! This is interpreted to mean that a person should not desire to change the state or condition in which God places him (see Mbiti, 1969: 410).

Another very wide spread belief in Africa is the limitation of supernatural powers and the fact that the divinities in spite of their extensive powers over their devotees are also dependent on the latter for strength and relevance. This belief is aptly expressed in an Ikwerre proverb: The villagers may belong to a god but the god also belongs to the villagers (ElechiAmadi, 1987: 1). This implication of control is still implicit in a Kalabari proverb: Ifa spirit becomes too violent, they will tell him the stick they carved him with. The import of this proverb is based on the fact that "the stick they carved him with" is a figure of speech for "the instrument of their (devotees) power over him" (see Robin Horton, 1965: 8).

Invocations/ Incantations

These are words that are spoken, song or chanted to have a magic effect. They are usually addressed to the Supreme Being or the deities; and often times, are employed during rituals especially at the pouring of libation and the feeding of the deities. During incantations and invocations, we learn the names of the deities, their capabilities and limitations, their attributes and characters, their appellations and designations; and most significantly, the apprehensions, hopes and expectations of the devotees. Typical of such invocations and incantations is the one use by the Isiokpo-Ikwerre to invite home the ancestor for his weekly ritual meal.

Great Ancestor, the founder of our lineage
He who sits at a place and oversees the entire lineage,
He who sits at a place and protects his children
Wherever they may be,
Our great father, the small piece of dried meat that fills the mouth,
Killer of elephants and leopards!
The tree that towers above the palm trees!
Come home and eat (George Tasie 2007: 133).

Another example of incantations is the one employed by the Yoruba toward off the effect of witchcraft and sorcery.

Akindudu is the name we call life
Akamababa is the name we call Esu
Long- pointed- stick- that kills- a hunter from
The farm is what we call Songo;
He- who- has- sparse- hair- on- the chest- and-
Goes- around- last- year's- abandoned- farm,
Is what we call Sopo
It is He- who- rolls- them- on- the- ground, roll
Them on the ground for me;
The sorcerers that wish me evil
He- who- rolls- them- on- the- ground roll them
On the ground for me;
The witches that wish me evil
He- who- rolls- them- on- the- ground, roll them
On the ground for me
(Awolalu and Dopamu, 1979: 252).

Incantations such as this are used by Yoruba toward off evil influence and to protect themselves against the evil machinations of sorcerers and witches.

IV. LEGENDS

Another very important aspect of oral tradition which is useful to the study of African traditional religion is legend. Legend by its nature talks about historical persons who lived in a time earlier than but continuous with our present time, but who were remarkably outstanding either because of their extreme strength or weakness. A careful study of the divinities and spirit forces in the pantheon of African religion will reveal that a reasonable number are no more than deified heroes and celebrities. Some of the divinities were once leading personalities who brought about innovations and conferred benefits on their societies; whereas, others were legendary figures who metamorphosed from ordinary mortals and became deified. The example of the Yoruba Songo, the god of thunder and lightning, will suffice.

There are many legends woven around Songo as a historical figure. One of such legends holds strongly that Songo was the fourth *Alafin* (king) of Oyo. During his reign, which was very tyrannical, he could kill by spurting fire from his mouth. His authorities, however, were challenged by two of his ministers. Growing jealous of them, he sent the two to fight against each other, hoping that both might be slain. However, he was himself deposed by the victor in the fight, and he committed suicide by hanging himself on an *ayon* tree. He, however, became deified after his death, and he took on the attributes of Jakuta, the original thunder divinity of Yoruba land (Awolalu and Dopamu 1979: 87-4).

The examples are inexhaustible and can go on and on, depicting rather clearly, that some African deities were once humans (legendary figures) who impacted enormously on their societies.

From our discussions so far, it is very glaring that oral tradition still remains largely our access to understanding African religion and a veritable tool to expressing and interpreting African beliefs and practices.

V. CONCLUSION

To sum up, I would like to highlight two very important issues, especially as they relate to oral tradition, which I consider very necessary for the continual relevance and survival of African indigenous religion. First, this essay, as I have demonstrated in the previous section, has shown that Africa is largely an oral continent where information is still preserved in the memory of living persons. African rich philosophical and religious formulations are unequivocally encapsulated and expressed in various forms of oral traditions which are then passed on (by word of mouth) from generation to generation.

Secondly, the limitations of this "heritage of the mouth", in the face of a rapidly changing world, where values are shifting fast, spell danger for African indigenous religion. The ever operative factor of death, which frequently carries away old people who are custodians of cultural heritage; low life expectancy for which Africa has become notorious, and the radical and continuous breakdown of cultural barriers by forces of modern change call for urgent need to document for posterity a religion whose tenets have been seriously battered by these agents of change and is now on the threshold of extinction.

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