

THE ADEQUACY OF THE CONCEPTS OF ANIMISM, PRELOGICAL AND UNSCIENTIFIC, AS DESCRIPTIONS OF THE AFRICAN WORLDVIEW

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Sociologists and social anthropologists have treated African religion as if it were a bizarre museum item, entirely different from other religions or religious phenomena found in Western culture. They have given it a conceptual interpretation, that betrays their prejudices about African cultures, which, in many ways, are not valid, and lack rational justification. There has been too much confused thinking about the religious practices and beliefs of Africans. The people have been described by some writers as pagans, heathens, or men, whose lives are dominated and trammelled by superstitions. It has been said that they lack theological ideas, and that all the elements, which make other religious sublime, are lacking in African religion. Even missionaries were misguided about African religion, and, by their muddled thinking, propagated erroneous ideas about African religious beliefs and practices.

Evans-Pritchard, in his book *Theories of Primitive Religion*, described “the great myth makers”, like Darwin, Marx, Engels, Freud, etc., men who not only dismissed, in a perfunctory manner, primitive religion as mere “epiphenomenal essences”, but were, indeed, using what they called “primitive religion” as a paradigm to justify their attack on religion as religion.¹ Their methodology was essentially evolutionary. All of them, including, in a way, Evans-Pritchard himself, treated society as something gradually moving towards a scientific consciousness. However, the main contention of most writers on religion was that primitive religion lacked theological awareness. Writing about this attitude towards primitive religion, Evans-Pritchard reappraised the words of Samuel Baker, who, speaking on the religion of the Northern Nilotes, said: “Without any exception, they are without a belief in a Supreme Being. Neither have they any form of worship, nor idolatry, nor is the darkness of their souls enlightened by even a ray of superstition. The mind is as stagnant as the morass which forms its puny world.”² This view of Baker

is obviously wrong, and is not tenable, in the light of present evidence of religion in African cultures. And it is consoling to realise that, as early as 1971, Sir Edward Tylor was able to show, from evidence available, even at that time, that this could not be true.³ Later he (Tylor) propounded the “Theory of Souls”, or “animism”, as the fundamental concept of religion.

ANIMISM AS A THEORY OF RELIGION

Tylor defined animism as “the doctrine of souls, and other spiritual beings in general”, and regarded this as “the great element of the philosophy of religion”. According to Tylor, the theory of animism divides into two great dogmas, forming part of one consistent doctrine. The one, concerning souls of individual creatures, capable of continued existence after death; and the other, concerning other spirits, ascending upwards to the rank of powerful deities. Thus, animism, in its full development, includes the beliefs in souls and in a future state . . . resulting in some kind of active worship.⁴

In illustrating this theory, Tylor looks at the fact of dreams and visions, and asserts that it was in consequence of dreams, in which man’s body apparently engaged in normal or abnormal activities elsewhere, that man conceived the idea of a separate soul or spirit, and came to believe that other souls visited his own. He also looks at the experience of death, and discovers that the absence of an element in man makes all the difference between the living and the dead, and that it is this doctrine of the souls that gave birth to the wider doctrine of spirits, which later transformed itself to a complete philosophy of natural religion. This animism is believed to occur at the threshold of conceptual thinking, and, in the absence of rigid distinctions between the natural and the supernatural, the animate and the inanimate, and the phenomenal order, is identified with that of human existence, and the behaviour of the one equated with that of the other.⁵

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE THEORY

Looking more closely at this theory, it is discovered that Tylor first stresses the idea of the soul, or ghost, and then extends it to animate creatures, and inanimate things. Therefore, his theory can be broken into two main ideas – the first, dealing with origin, and the second, with development. With these as his models, he maintains that primitive man’s reflections on such experiences as death, trances, and dreams, substantiated the postulate of the duality of human nature and personality. The temporary detachment of the

soul from the body, and the experiences outside the body, led Tylor to develop the “ghost-theory”, from which he concluded that the immaterial entity called soul wanders about at night, and leaves the body permanently at death. This spirit, which, from time to time, animated objects, ultimately became the focal point of worship, e.g., the ancestor-cult. This, furthermore, led to the supposition that animate and inanimate objects – sun, stars, rocks, livers, etc., may have both life and personality ascribed to them. Thus, the worship of natural objects was born, too. In all this, it seems that Tylor’s desire was to make animism embrace both, what could rightly be described as animism, and what his predecessors, like James Frazer, called magic or fetishism.

Nevertheless, it is helpful to distinguish what Tylor said from what he did not say. According to him, “animism” is an attendant factor in every religion, in every culture, and at any level of development. So he speaks of “animism of the savage” and “animism of the civilised men” – a pattern of doctrine and belief, which began from rudimentary stages, and maintains itself, through processes of development, into a systematic and progressively-narrow and high-level definition. In other words, that “animism characterises tribes very low in the scale of humanity, and thence ascends, deeply modified in its transmission, but, from first to last, preserving an unbroken continuity into the midst of high modern culture.”⁶

Thus, it is clear that those who use the term exclusively for African religion, quoting Tylor as their authority, did not understand, or were misquoting, Tylor. Commenting on Tylor’s view, Idowu contends that animism is at a lower level in certain cultures, in the sense that it embodies both animate and inanimate things. This, however, does not “limit it to one culture, nor is it, even in any one culture, limited to the general, contemptible, religious featurelessness, and indefiniteness, which is the popularly-accepted meaning of the word. Rather, in every culture, it reaches the conception of gods, and invariably to the concept of the Supreme Being.”⁷

With particular reference to Africa, there is a sense in which “animism” forms a vital element in the make-up of religion; that is, if it is defined merely as a recognition of the existence of spirit, or spirits, as separate from the material – an idea that would indicate that, in no part of the world, do people offer worship to “wood and stone”. It is, also accepted that the African worldview is full of spirits, known to be distinct from material objects, even though they reside in, or give expressions through, material objects. Such

sacred objects are mere symbols to aid worship. It is also true that recognition of the existence of spirits is more pronounced in Africa than elsewhere, but that is merely in degrees, since, even in the West, most people are taking to spiritism and occultism. And, in the words of Atkins: "All the beings of the world have, in them, some particles of the heaven-soul and the earth-soul. . . . The universe is crowded with them, they animate even the inanimate objects."⁸ And, speaking of the religion of the Chinese, De Groot said, "The primeval form of this religion, and its very core, is animism. It is based on an implicit belief in the animation of the universe, and of every being or thing, which exists in it."⁹ Indeed, even the very nature of Christianity is grounded on the fact that God is Spirit.

Thus, we see that animism, properly defined, cannot be predicated as a monopoly of Africa, or any other race, however "low in the scale of humanity".¹⁰ It applies as part definition of every religion. It could apply to the indigenous religion of Africa, if the term was restricted strictly to its basic definition as a belief in, and as a recognition, and acceptance of, the fact of, the existence of spirits, who may use material objects as temporary residences, while manifesting their presence and actions through natural objects and phenomena. Beyond this, it is most inappropriate, and should not be applied as the name for the religion of Africa.

PRELOGICAL: A DESCRIPTION OF AFRICAN RELIGION

Levy Bruhl held that one might legitimately begin a study of social life by analysis of ways of thought and ways of behaviour. So he approached his own evaluation from a logical point of view. First, he condemned the psychological approach taken by Tylor in trying to explain social facts by processes of his own personal thought, which were the product of different conditions from those, which had moulded the minds of the people he sought to understand. He felt that Tylor's advanced mentality coloured whatever he said about the primitive peoples, whose minds were still in a dormant, undeveloped stage. He concluded that the mentality of an individual derives from the collective representations of his society, which are obligatory for him.¹¹ Thus, Levy Bruhl stresses that every type of society has its distinctive mentality, since each has its distinctive customs and institutions.

Levy Bruhl's idea can be valid, in as far as he maintains that religious beliefs were the product of social milieu of a people. But this argument breaks

down when it concludes that people of simple technology have “primitive” or “pre-logical” mentality, making it look as if he merely wanted to emphasise the difference between civilised and primitive peoples. Howbeit, this is the only thing that gives his theory some hints of originality, and so popularised it. To Levy Bruhl, no doubt, the primitive thought differs in quality, not just in degrees, from the thought of civilised peoples. But, if this were so, it would be impossible to communicate with primitive people, or even to learn their language. The fact that this is possible shows that this contrast between civilised and primitive peoples was rather strong. Furthermore, his idea that primitive man did not make distinctions between his personality and his shadow, or name, and so believes that what affects the one affects the other, did not take into consideration the many primitive peoples who are not bothered by what happens to their name or shadow, but whom he bundled into the same group as those who do, because of his generalisation.¹² It is also wrong to suppose that, to the primitive man, there is a contradiction between objective, causal explanation and a mystical one. To the primitive man, the fact that death is attributed to witchcraft does not exclude the notion that the man was killed by a buffalo.¹³

In all, therefore, Levy Bruhl made primitive peoples far more superstitious than they really are. He was definitely wrong in distinguishing degrees of religious experience by the paradigms of social development. Religious beliefs are a matter of the intermediary deities, and the spirit of the ancestors, the people have a feeling of awe and veneration for the Supreme Being, who is high above all deities, and who animates them all.¹⁴ Religion in Africa, therefore, is like any other religion, and deals with the same spiritual matters. The content is the same, but the procedures may vary according to the social development of the people. It is, therefore, very derogatory and illogical to describe the religion of Africa, alone, as prelogical.

UNSCIENTIFIC: A DESCRIPTION OF AFRICAN RELIGIONS

Evans-Pritchard, in his own effort, not so much to criticise Levy Bruhl, as to explain and, indeed, reinterpret what the latter meant by his key expressions and concepts (which evoked much hostility), ended up describing African religion in another term – unscientific¹⁵ – which, like the other terminologies, was not an adequate name for the religion of the Africans.

Interpreting Levy Bruhl's idea, Evans-Pritchard said that the term "prelogical" does not imply that the primitive people are unintelligent or incapable of coherent thought, but that most of their beliefs are incompatible with a critical and scientific view of the universe, and contain evident contradictions. Furthermore, that the word does not mean allogical or anti-logical, but, rather, means "uncritical" or "unscientific", when applied to primitive mentality. This primitive mentality refers not to an individual ability, or otherwise to reason, but to the categories in which he reasons – his patterns of thought, namely, axioms, values, and sentiments, which, among primitive people, are mystical, beyond verification, impervious to experience, and indifferent to contradiction.

A CRITIQUE OF EVANS-PRITCHARD

However, these explanations are not without flaws. Firstly, it should be understood that belief, an outcome of experience, is subjective and should not be understood fully by one who has not experienced it. Secondly, there is no universally-accepted standard for measuring spirituality. Yet Evans-Pritchard seems to be saying that the civilised world provides the standard of evaluation.¹⁶ But, I submit, that the mental forms of a race should not be the norm for another race. Rather, each human race has its mode of life, its own peculiar way of handling its environment, and which should be respected by all. Finally, the meaning of the word should not be changed at will. "Prelogical" should not mean one thing generally, and another, when applied specifically to primitive peoples. Therefore, rather than accuse Levy Bruhl, Evans-Pritchard, himself, is guilty of the interpretation he gave Levy Bruhl's ideas.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

It is noteworthy that none of the anthropologists who wrote about primitive religion had been near a primitive people. They relied on what European explorers, traders, and missionaries told them. But such ideas were not only fabricated, and unreliable, they were casual, superficial, and grossly inadequate, since what the observers noted was what struck them as curious, crude, and sensational. All these theories, therefore, miss the mark, since the proponents "were seeking for explanations in terms of origins and essences, instead of relations".¹⁸ This reflects their state of mind at the time they wrote, having assumed that the souls, spirits, and gods of religion have no reality. They merely tried to justify their loss of faith in religions, hence everything

they said on primitive religion was coloured by their early religious experiences. They were more concerned with religious practices rather than the spiritual content of these beliefs, and, therefore, saw in primitive religion, a weapon, which could be used with deadly effect upon Christianity.¹⁹

Schmidt, in his confutation of Renan, said: "If religion is essentially of the inner life, it follows that it can be truly grasped from within. . . . This can be better done by one in whose inward consciousness an experience of religion plays a part. There is but too much danger that the other (a non-believer) will talk of religion, as a blind man might of colours, or one totally devoid of ear, of a beautiful musical composition."²⁰ In religion, therefore, there are psychological, sociological, and emotional elements, but none of these can fully explain it. It is not sound scientific method to seek for origins where they cannot be found. Religion belongs to the realm of spirit, in which faith is the key word, while science deals primarily with relations, not origins and essences. But, if primitive religion could be explained "as an intellectual aberration, a mirage induced by emotional stress, or by its social functions", it implies that even the higher religions could be discredited, and disposed of in the same way.²¹

NOTES

1. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, Oxford UK: Clarendon Press, 1965, p. 1.
2. *Ibid*, pp. 6ff.
3. Edward Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 3rd edn, London UK: J. Murray, 1891, pp. 423ff.
4. *Ibid*, vol 1, 5th edn, 1913, pp. 424ff.
5. E. O. James, *The Concept of Deity*, London UK: Hutchinson University Library, 1950, p. 31.
6. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, vol 1, p. 426.
7. E. B. Edowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, London UK: SCM Press, 1973, p. 132.
8. G. G. Atkins, *Procession of the Gods*, New York NY: R. R. Smith, 1930, p. 284.
9. *Ibid*.
10. Edowu, *African Traditional Religion*, p. 134.
11. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, p. 79.
12. *Ibid*, p. 88.
13. *Ibid*, p. 90.
14. K. Busia, "The Ashanti", in *African Worlds*, C. D. Forde, ed., London UK: Oxford University Press, 1954, p. 193.
15. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, p. 81.

16. Ibid, p. 6.
17. Ibid, p. 15.
18. W. Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth of Religion*, H. J. Rose, tran., London UK: Methuen & Co, 1931, p. 6.
19. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, p. 15.
20. Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth of Religion*, p. 6.
21. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, p. 15.