



## 5. “IGWEBUIKE”: The Key to Understanding African Traditional Religion

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Mbiti (1970) understands African ontology as a religious ontology, which is heavily anthropocentric. In this ontology are God, the spirits, animals and plants and objects; however, at the centre is the human person. If this ontology would be understood, he argues that there is the need to penetrate its unity. Mbiti, therefore, avers that the African concept of time is the key to understanding the African religious ontology.

The concept of time may help to explain beliefs, attitudes, practices and general way of life of African peoples not only in the traditional set up but also in the modern situation, whether of political, economic, educational or church life. (p. 16).

His idea of African time is built around his research on the Kikamba and Gikuyu languages, in which he analyzed three verbs that speak of the past and the future, covering only a period of six months and not beyond two years at most. He defines the African time as “a composition of events which have occurred, those that are taking place now and those which are immediately to occur” (p. 17). This would mean that Africans set their minds on things that have passed rather than on the future. He describes the African time as concrete, epochal and not mathematical. He thinks that when Africans are sitting down idle, they are not wasting time but waiting for time or producing time.

Mbiti's African time, in the perspective of Gbadegesin (1991), is only a communal world-view report which was never evaluated. Gyekye (1975), Kagame (1976) and Izu (2010) see Mbiti's African time as insulting and false, as it does not represent the general concept of time among Africans. Gyekye argues that contrary to Mbiti's African time, the Akan people of Ghana have a future time. From the foregoing, it is obvious that Mbiti's African time is not a consistent principle in African religious and cultural thoughts, and as such cannot be regarded as the unity or the key to understanding African traditional religion.

Koehn (1977) speaks of African myths as the key to understanding African traditional religion and metaphysics. He writes that:

Myth expresses the history, the culture and the inner experience of the African himself. The myth portrays the wishes and the fears of the African man as he gropes to understand the unknown by dissecting and remolding it to fit his frame of reference. In the myth, the African's metaphysics are created and his beliefs constructed. (p. 118).

Koehn, thus concludes that:

The myth is the essence of the African himself in history. The modern African, if he is to find his real identity and to grasp the remnant of his culture, must look for it in

myth... The African myth tarried to preserve the last drop of African-ness. It is the encyclopedia engraved in the chambers of the African mind to be passed from generation to generation. (p. 139).

Although myths articulate and preserve the outcome of investigations on the origin of the world, the national god, the origin of humanity, its place in creation, deity, the temple, the cult, etc., it cannot be regarded as the key to understanding African religion or metaphysics, for the simple reason that mythology is not an underlying principle in African traditional religion. Myths vary from one religious culture to another, and the religious meanings that mythological elements present in one culture might not be the same in another. Thus, rather than speak of unity, myths introduce the subject of polarity in African traditional religion.

How then can we arrive at the key to understanding African traditional religion? The key to the understanding ATR should be based on the African cosmos. Cosmology, etymologically, is from two Greek words: cosmos and Logos, meaning 'universe' and 'science' respectively. Put together, it is the 'science of the universe'. Scholars like Wambutda (1986), Ejizu (1986), Achebe (1986), Metuh (1987), Quarcoopome (1987), Arinze (1970), Madu (2004) and Kanu (2015a) hold that African cosmology is simply the way Africans perceive, conceive and contemplate their universe; the lens through which they see reality, which affects their value systems and attitudinal orientations. Cosmology is, therefore, the search for the meaning of life, and an unconscious but natural tendency to arrive at a unifying base that constitutes a frame of meaning often viewed as *terminus ad quo* (origin), and as *terminus ad quem* (end) (Kanu 2012).

African cosmology is essentially the underlying thought link that holds together the African value system, philosophy of life, social conduct, morality, folklores, myths, rites, rituals, norms, rules, ideas, cognitive mappings and theologies (Kanu 2015b). *Igwebuiké* as a concept captures the is-ness of the African cosmos; a universe of complementarity and sharedness. *Igwebuiké* is, therefore, African cosmology and African cosmology is *Igwebuiké*. It is *Igwebuiké* because in spite of its departmentalization into the worlds of the spirits and human beings (Edeh 1983, Abanuka 2004 & Ijiomah 2005, Kanu 2017a), it is not a bifurcated world. The spiritual and physical dimensions overlap and harmoniously interact. In this interaction, human beings commune with God, the ancestors, etc., and vice versa. While the ancestors do for human beings what they cannot do for themselves, human beings do for the ancestors what they cannot achieve by themselves. This interactive capacity of the African universe has instilled a strong sense of community in every dimension of the African life, such that to be without belonging is to be annihilated (Kanu 2017b). This has not only defined the social and political dimensions of the African life, but the spiritual or religious dimension as well. It is within this context that *Igwebuiké* is employed as the key to understanding African traditional religion. To understand the meaning that *Igwebuiké* conveys as a thought current, is to understand the dynamics of African traditional religion.