BRILL

MONOTHEISM AND PANTHEISM IN AFRICA

BY

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Nearly a hundred years ago E. B. Tylor wrote that, in the strict sense, "no savage tribe of monotheists has ever been known. Nor are any fair representatives of the lower culture in a strict sense pantheists. The doctrine which they do widely hold, and which opens to them a course tending in one or other of these directions, is polytheism culminating in the rule of one supreme divinity" [1]. These were bold words at a time when little was known accurately of the beliefs of many "tribes", among whom Tylor included Africans whom he had never visited. Later field studies have brought better knowledge but few overall theories, though in recent years some explanations have been offered to solve the diversity of African religious thought in both monotheistic and pantheistic directions.

In 1923 R. S. Rattray produced his classic work on *Ashanti,* in which he illustrated the worship of the Supreme Being, ³Nyame, with photographs of priests and temples, and texts of prayers in the Twi language and in translation. He also described some of the shrines and ceremonies of lesser gods (*abosom*), especially the river Tano, lake Bosomtwe, the river Bea and the sea, Opo. Ashanti religion appeared to be a mixture, in which an undoubted High God ruled concurrently with lesser divine and ancestral spirits, and the explanation of this diversity was said to be that men needed the favour of every kind of spiritual being and it would be a mistake to concentrate upon one and incur the anger of those who were neglected.

Twenty years later J. B. Danquah, in *The Akan Doctrine of God,* criticized Rattray for missing "the whole sunshine" of Ashanti religion, objected to the term "sky God", and declared that "altars and shrines to ancestral and divine gods are unknown things to the Akan" [2]. Danquah expounded a philosophy which selected three names of the Ashanti Supreme Being, to indicate in turn the basic idea of Deity, a personal religious God, and an infinite Being. The unity in diversity of God was affirmed, and most worship of the personal God was said to be offered through the intermediary of the ancestors. In fact God himself was called "the Great Ancestor", a conception

claimed to be original to the African. The ancestral spirit is a creative energy, an "over-soul", which does not die but is honoured and deified in the dignity of the Great Ancestor, himself the father of all, and of one blood with men who come from his blood and breath. This gives a unity of God, ancestors and men, in which the continuing blood of the community is the greatest factor of existence.

Now comes Harry Sawyerr's *God: Ancestor or Creator?* (1970) in which he shows that at first he was bewildered by Danquah's claim that God is the Great Ancestor, but finally came to accept it wholeheartedly and to apply this notion not only to the Akan but also the Yoruba and the Mende. The most that can be said is that Sawyerr has demonstrated that the grounds for claiming that African belief views God as ancestor are extremely weak if not non-existent. Little solid evidence is offered beyond the titles of Father and Grandfather applied to God, but they do not prove that he is ancestor any more than the opening words of the Lord's Prayer reveal a Christian ancestral cult.

Danquah's work was severely criticized, for ignoring the facts of gods and shrines which Rattray had illustrated, and for importing European philosophical ideas into African thought. But his emphasis upon the unity of divine and human received less attention and, if it could be distinguished from other speculations, it might still be worthy of consideration. After another twenty years a further attempt to solve the diversity of belief appeared in E. B. Idowu's *Olódùmarè, God in Yoruba Belief*. Here some of the divinities are described as servants of the Supreme Being in the creation and governance of the world. The Yoruba gods are numerous, sometimes said to be two hundred or four hundred, and Idowu quotes invocations to one thousand and sixty divinities, which Mbiti calls "easily the largest collection of them in Africa" [3]. Yet Idowu considers that the Yoruba pantheon cannot be described as polytheism because, strictly speaking, that would suggest that God is one among many divinities, whereas he is not only sovereign but "wholly other" than the gods. The divinities are collectively named *orisha*, "gods" or "spirits", a term which is never applied to the Supreme Being. This suggests to Idowu that there is an implicit monotheism in Yoruba religion, its "soul", which makes it a coherent whole. But since that monotheism has been attenuated by the many divinities that are worshipped, Idowu suggests the "startling" label of "Diffused monotheism" for Yoruba religion, to indicate that there is a supreme Deity

who delegates some of his powers to functionaries who work at his command [4].

Such attempts to diminish the role of the lesser gods and claim a degree of monotheism for Africa may appear to be influenced by preconceptions and misunderstandings. Polytheism, according to such writers as Tylor, had been branded as the belief of "savage tribes", whereas the modern missionary religions in Africa, Christianity and Islam, are monotheistic and African traditional religious ought to be the same. On the other hand there may be a reluctance to consider the possibilities of more pantheistic explanations of African belief. This appears again in two of the latest studies by J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* and *Concepts of God in Africa.* These works are comparative studies and anthologies of the beliefs of a great many African peoples, derived from writers on particular areas. Mbiti speaks of the "unity and plurality of God", affirming that "every African people recognizes one God", but admitting that some people have other divinities in their cosmology which are "mainly the personification of God's activities" or deified national heroes [5]. It is said that some Africans recognize dual aspects of the one God, remoteness and nearness, good and evil. Occasionally a divine Triad is reported, which may fit conveniently into the conception of the family, but the overall impression is that of divine unity.

It may be that some African writers are too concerned with fitting religion into a framework of monotheism and would do better to recognize that religion can operate in different ways according to need. Evans-Pritchard, in his great work on *Nuer Religion,* remarked that whether religion is called monotheistic or not is largely a matter of definition. Spirit is not thought of as different from God, and though "he is figured in many diverse figures" he can be thought of as each and as one. Nuer religion is "modalistic", neither exclusively monotheistic nor polytheistic, but both at different levels, and at other levels it is totemistic and fetishistic. These are not incompatible conceptions of spiritual activity, but they correspond to different ways of thinking about the numinous at various levels of experience and to different kinds of sacrifice. In fact the Nuer are so basically monotheistic that the ancestors are subordinate, animism and magic are negligible, and there is no idea of that impersonal force or dynamism which has been found in some other African religions [6].

Mbiti again sees African ontology as anthropocentric, in the sense that everything is understood in relation to man. This gives a unity

or solidarity to the whole of existence. In addition there is a "force, power or energy" which permeates the universe, coming from God who controls it, but partially shared by the spirits and manipulated by priests and doctors [7]. Despite this description of a divine pervading force, Mbiti declares that it has nothing to do with what Placide Tempels had called "vital force", asserting that this notion cannot be applied to some African peoples. Here he agrees with Evans-Pritchard but gives no more reasons than the blunt denial.

Tempels' little book, *La Philosophie Bantoue,* has been so influential, especially through popular writers like Jahn, that reference must be made to it [8]. One of its great, and often neglected, virtues is the emphasis it gives to the unity of the Bantu world-view. The "vital force" or power of which it speaks is stated to be the central and single value, for religion and morals. In the created universe this power is centred on man, and the present human generation on earth is the centre of all humanity, including the ancestors. But this unity, this philosophy of force, is not man-created but it derives from and inheres in the divine being. "Force, the potent life, vital energy" are the object of religious and magical actions, but everything depends upon God who possesses force in himself and is the source of power in every creature. The origin, subsistence and annihilation of beings and powers comes from God alone. He is the creator, who brings being out of non-being, and every birth is due to the God who creates life. All being is one, and beings interact on one another, but there is a hierarchy of being in which God is the supreme and unifying power. God has power in himself and he gives power and survival to others, since he is the one who increases force. After God in the hierarchy come the founding fathers of the clans, above the immediate ancestors, since they are beings who participate in the divine power most directly and exercise its influence on all posterity. Then come ancestors, men, animals and inanimate objects all of which, down to taboo and magic, have their proper power.

The ideas expounded by Tempels were taken farther by Kagame in *La Philosophie bantu-rwandaise de l'Être,* and popularized by Jahn in *Muntu.* Among the Bantu of Rwanda the term *Muntu* includes living beings, God himself, spirits and some trees. The universal force, *Ntu,* which never occurs apart from its manifestations, is being itself, the power in which beings coalesce. There are other categories, of things, place and time, and modality, but all stem from the cosmic *Ntu* as its manifestations. These forces are continually in

action and constantly effective, but the basic *Ntu* would only be revealed if the whole universe came to a stop [9].

The theories of Tempels and Kagame, on the Bantu of the Congo and Rwanda have been criticized, and they are rejected by Evans-Pritchard and Mbiti for the Nuer and Baganda. But some support came from one of the greatest Africanists, E. W. Smith. Long ago, in his classic study of *The Ila-speaking Peoples of Northern Rhodesia,* Smith had named Dynamism as "the belief in, and the practices associated with the belief in hidden, mysterious, super-sensible, pervading energy, powers, potencies, forces" [10]. He spoke of Muntu and Bantu as definitely person and persons, and the root Ntu as seeming to indicate existence. For Smith this was an impersonal Dynamism, and when the Zambian Bantu spoke of personal spirits there was a dualism in their thought. Thirty years after writing this Smith welcomed the ideas of Tempels, with some reservations [11]. Tempels would not allow that the Bantu should be called Dynamists or Energetists, if this suggested that force was impersonal or undifferentiated. He maintained that there was an essential difference between powers, though Smith was not so sure. However, general approval was given to the exposition of Bantu philosophy as affecting not only thought, but action, custom and morality. What is ontologically good and morally just is that which maintains and increases the power that comes from God.

Edwin Smith also gave a model for African religious thought, regarding it as a pyramid. At the apex was God the Supreme Being, on the two sides were the great spiritual powers manifested in gods and ancestors, and at the base were the lower powers of magic. In the middle was man, under the influence of many different kinds of power. This pyramid roughly corresponds to the hierarchy suggested by Tempels, though it should not be taken as a fixed model since the interaction of forces and their continuing links with God would suggest that a more appropriate model might be a circle, or perhaps an egg!

Not mentioning such speculations, and sternly anthropological in method, the work of G. Lienhardt in *Divinity and Experience* is yet not dissimilar in some of its expositions, and it is interesting that he writes on the Dinka, a neighbouring Sudanese people to the monotheistic Nuer of Evans-Pritchard. The Dinka speak of *Nhialic* as a being, sometimes a High God, since the root of the word is "up" or "above". *Nhialic* is father or creator, but other spirits are also said

to be *Nhialic* and so the word "divinity" is used in translation in order to convey the notion of a being and a kind of existence, and also a quality of being. Even unexpected behaviour in an animal can be spoken of as "it is divinity", "it is power" (*jok*, a less specific word which may refer to a particular non-human power). These powers are higher in the scale than men, but they do not form a separate "spirit-world", since they are known as participating in human life and affecting men for good or ill. The unity of beings is manifested within a single world of experience as it concerns men [12].

Africa is a vast and divided continent and obviously there are many varieties of religious thought, in which pantheistic, monotheistic, polytheistic and animistic strands can be observed. Even ambitious recent works like those of Mbiti list hundreds of African peoples, but only give outlines, do not exhaust the material that is known, and leave many other peoples little studied. It must suffice to quote one more example. In 1965 there appeared a symposium entitled *African Systems of Thought*, after a conference in Rhodesia at which English and French-speaking anthropologists studied aspects of African life. It must be said that they presented little system and even less philosophy, and some of the essays are of a tedious particularity. Tempels is mentioned casually only once, Kagame and Lienhardt not at all. Only in the very last chapter does L. V. Thomas of Dakar reveal some profound elements of African thought in his "Brève esquisse sur la pensée cosmologique du Diola" [13].

The Diola live in Senegal in West Africa and their world-system is compared by Thomas, like Edwin Smith, with a pyramid. It is a pyramid of beings, always in equilibrium and perfectly coherent with itself. There is a diversity of forms but the essence of being is power (la Force), both expansive and penetrating. The same energy circulates everywhere, under the impulse of God who is the natural force and cannot remain indefinitely wrapped up in himself but needs a play of supplementary powers. These do not add to his being, or take anything away from it, but the world comes from this divine activity. God is the supreme energetic source (Foyer), who is the model of the vital source or soul, and above all of mind and spirit. Cosmic powers are quantitative variations of the supreme Power, not qualitative, because even a diminished power remains always the force of the supreme Power. The hierarchy of power is as unchangeable as the being of God, but the powers are in constant inter-

action, either naturally or impelled by human ritual and magic. Thomas proceeds to distinguish four kinds of power in Diola philosophy, which to some degree resemble those indicated by Smith, Tempels and Kagame in East and Central Africa. There is the uncreated and creating power, the being of God. There are superior powers among those that are created, which both give and receive power by convergent energy. There are mediating powers which rule the cosmos and join God and man. Finally there are conditioning powers, in the physical universe where man can shape matter in order to cooperate with the eternal laws of the cosmos.

In this pyramid of powers man remains in the centre, so that the scheme is anthropocentric in one sense. Nevertheless, although the primacy of man in the world is certain, it cannot be measured against the value of God, which is why sometimes God appears to be cold, distant or impersonal. God is both the supreme Power and the uncreated act, the principle of cohesion of all things, of conservation and renewal.

Such African philosophies, not held everywhere but found with resemblances among peoples separated by thousands of miles, are full of interest for the study of religions. Numerous attempts have been made recently to work out coherent systems of theology for African religion, and my own suggestion of four categories of polytheism has perhaps provoked a reaction towards a dogmatic monotheistic teaching. I wish that more attention had been paid to my use of Tempels during the last twenty years, because solutions to the problems of diversity may lie in that philosophy of powers [14]. On the one hand efforts made towards reducing polytheism to unity may be regarded as a sort of pantheism, comparable with the Indian reduction of the many gods to the one Brahman. On the other hand such African speculations, even if they have something of pantheism about them, are also theistic. Belief in the supremacy of God, having vital links of being with man and all creation, appears in nearly all these philosophies, and the overall impression is that much of African thought is both theistic and unitary.

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