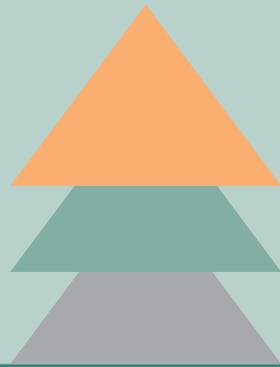


Religions and Development Research Programme

African Traditional Religion and Concepts of Development: A Background Paper

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African Development Bank

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Research Programme, International Development Department, University of Birmingham
and Policy and Policy and Research Unit, Islamic Relief)



Working Paper 17- 2007



Religions and Development

Research Programme

The Religions and Development Research Programme Consortium is an international research partnership that is exploring the relationships between several major world religions, development in low-income countries and poverty reduction. The programme is comprised of a series of comparative research projects that are addressing the following questions:

- How do religious values and beliefs drive the actions and interactions of individuals and faith-based organisations?
- How do religious values and beliefs and religious organisations influence the relationships between states and societies?
- In what ways do faith communities interact with development actors and what are the outcomes with respect to the achievement of development goals?

The research aims to provide knowledge and tools to enable dialogue between development partners and contribute to the achievement of development goals. We believe that our role as researchers is not to make judgements about the truth or desirability of particular values or beliefs, nor is it to urge a greater or lesser role for religion in achieving development objectives. Instead, our aim is to produce systematic and reliable knowledge and better understanding of the social world.

The research focuses on four countries (India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Tanzania), enabling the research team to study most of the major world religions: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and African traditional belief systems. The research projects will compare two or more of the focus countries, regions within the countries, different religious traditions and selected development activities and policies.

The consortium consists of six research partner organisations, each of which is working with other researchers in the four focus countries:

- University of Birmingham, UK: International Development Department, Department of Theology and Religion, Centre for West African Studies, Centre for the Study of Global Ethics.
- University of Bath, UK: Centre for Development Studies.
- Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, New Delhi.
- Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research, Ibadan.
- University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.
- Lahore University of Management Sciences, Pakistan.

In addition to the research partners, links have been forged with non-academic and non-government bodies, including Islamic Relief.

Religions and Development Working Paper 17

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Contents

Preface	1
1 Introduction	3
1.1 Approaches to the study of ATR	4
1.2 Attempts by Africans to study ATR	9
2 Religion and culture: towards a definition	12
3. ATR: homogeneity or multiplicity of indigenous religions?	14
4 ATR: a definition	16
4.1 God	18
4.2 Spirits	20
4.3 Divine rulers	23
4.4 Humankind	24
5 Concepts of evil spirits, witches and sorcerers	26
6 Religious practices, ceremonies and festivals	29
7 ATR and concepts of development	30
7.1 Moral and ethical values in ATR	30
7.2 ATR, social conflict, crime and concepts of justice	33
7.3 ATR and the concept of public ethics: political authority and ethical behaviour	36
7.4 ATR, wealth and poverty: concepts of property ownership	40
7.5 ATR and gender roles and relations	43
8 Conclusion	50
Notes	51
References	52

Preface

This is one of a series of six background papers prepared as part of the Religions and Development Research Programme. Each aims to provide an introduction and overview of the teachings of one of the major faith traditions with which the programme is dealing: Christianity, African traditional religions, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism. Their purpose is to summarize recent material produced by the relevant religious organizations and by some of the main academic interpreters to provide background material on the understandings of 'development' that arise out of the core beliefs and values of each faith tradition.

Each review seeks to identify concepts and teachings relevant to human development within the relevant faith tradition, with reference to its teachings/ethics and theology. It also considers the extent to which the understandings have evolved over time; identifies major differences in the understanding of concepts developed by different branches within a faith tradition; and discusses the extent to which views associated with particular religious organisations and their adherents arise from their religious beliefs or are influenced by the social and cultural context in which adherents live.

The writers were asked to concentrate on the key concepts underlying the notion of 'development': development (goals, obstacles and appropriate strategies), poverty (and its causes), wealth, inequality and well-being. They were also asked to consider issues of particular relevance to the various components in this research programme

- a) Credit and debt
- b) Gender roles and equality
- c) Education (the role of education and access to educational opportunities)
- d) Engagement in public life through politics, social movements, advocacy, community organization etc
- e) Corruption/ethical behaviour in public life
- f) Livelihood decisions e.g. building wealth, seeking improved wellbeing, begging.

The contemporary discourse of development post-dates most religious teaching, which is not historically or even today couched in terms of the conventional international development discourse. However, each religious tradition has ideas about 'right social ordering' and provides guidelines to individuals and societies about the values and ethics they should adopt in their pursuit of a life that is not just spiritually rewarding but also morally and socially responsible. Interpreting these teachings in a

relatively short paper in the light of the terminology of development is problematic and the interpretations and views put forward by the authors of these papers are necessarily partial and provisional.

Moreover, all religious traditions have developed schools or denominations that present different interpretations of core teachings and practices. Religious traditions have also developed under the influence of different sorts of inputs: for example, from mystics, theologians, philosophers, ritual specialists or legal experts. While at certain times and in certain places particular interpretations of religious traditions may dominate, it is impossible to talk about a single view of development, for example *a Christian view* or *a Muslim view*, and instead we may find a range of opinions or even competing views. This difficulty is compounded by the fact the interpretation of teachings may vary between the authorities responsible at the highest level and local religious specialists, between the official sources and everyday lived religion, over time, and between places, where it is interpreted through the lens of differing cultural traditions.

Some of this variety is captured in the papers, but certainly not all. The authors themselves come from different backgrounds: not all are scholars from within the religious tradition about which they are writing, and not all are adherents of that tradition. Each has his or her own interests and preoccupations. The accounts are also dependent on the available sources, which do not necessarily deal with all the issues that the authors were asked to consider. Although each of the papers adopts a basically similar approach, their coverage and detailed organisation vary.

These papers were initially prepared for the use of the large international team of researchers engaged in the Religions and Development Research Programme. We hope, however, that they will be a useful resource for all those interested in the topic.

Carole Rakodi

Director, Religions and Development Research Programme.

1 Introduction

This paper is a trawl of literature on African Traditional Religion¹ (ATR) and development. This paper is not intended as a literature review, but as a background paper; the purpose of which is to shed light on how the religious tradition views certain development concepts. The paper is also intended to provide a basic overview of the religious tradition to readers who may be unfamiliar with it. Since there is very little literature on the ways in which ATR considers development issues, the review draws from the general literature on ATR to explain how ATR views certain concepts related to development; how these concepts have evolved over time and how the religion underpins the social and cultural attitudes and behaviours of Africans.²

Given that development, as either an analytical category or a societal goal, has many strands and meanings for different audiences, this review focuses on a range of developmental issues, not only those relevant to the Religions and Development (RaD) research programme, but those on which there is secondary literature vis-à-vis ATR. These concepts include: social conflict, crime and justice; public ethics; wealth and poverty; and gender.

In order to appreciate the linkages between ATR and the above issues in development, it is crucial to examine the world view and ethos of Africans, as contained in their religious symbols, and dictated by their perception of the Holy. The worldview and ethos of Africans not only demand and reinforce their emotional and behavioural commitments, but also govern and direct their everyday lives. Examining this is vital for appreciating the motivations behind the values and attitudes of Africans. In order to do this, the review first takes a reflexive approach, by examining the varied perspectives on, and approaches to, the study of ATR: who has studied the religion, for what purpose and for which audience. Discussing this is not only essential for pointing out changing trends in the study of the religion, but for also highlighting the extent to which earlier studies were influenced by value-loaded judgments because of their underlying motives and target audiences.

Following this discussion, the review considers the debate over whether ATR is a homogenous religion or a multiplicity of religions. This discussion is necessary to clarify and justify the conceptualisation of ATR as a homogenous religion used in this paper, which argues that ATR has a central unity of belief that justifies its conceptualisation as a single religious tradition.

Third, the review summarises the basic hierarchical structures underlying the convergence that marks the religion. In this section, attempts are made to summarise the 'basic world-view' that underpins the religion and essentially features everywhere on the sub-continent. Finally, the review takes each of the aforementioned issues in development - social justice; public ethics, poverty and gender - and explains them within the context of the religion. Here, I draw on existing literature not only to explain ATR's conception of these issues, but also to provide a context for understanding the underlying motivations behind Africans' attitudes and values.

1.1 Approaches to the study of ATR

Historical currents, such as evolutionism, colonialism, the functionalism of British and French anthropological schools and African nationalism, among many others, have influenced the study of African Traditional Religion. These factors have, to a large extent, influenced not only methodological approaches used to study ATR, but also interpretations of the religion. These currents have also meant that several phases can be distinguished, as different authors with different purposes and points of view - at different or similar periods in history - have adopted diverse approaches to the study of the religion. Ray (1976, p 2-14) outlines three distinct phases of the study of ATR. The initial phase, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, comprised mostly written accounts by early missionaries, travellers and colonial agents. Their accounts of the religion, for the most part, were neither objective nor scholarly, but were subjective and largely based on unsystematic "collections of random observations and superficial opinions designed to appeal to the popular European mind" (Ibid, p 2).

The main analysts during the second phase were trained anthropologists, undertaking more systematic and scientifically rigorous field studies in the early twentieth century. Not only were these early anthropologists more objective than the early missionaries, colonial agents and travellers, they also comprised both African and European anthropologists, who provided monographs on the religion, particularly during the 1930s. The third and more recent phase of the study of ATR comprises a small but growing number of primarily African authors from the disciplines of theology and philosophy, who attempt to combine anthropological and historical methods in the study of ATR. This they do by combining the "search for evidence of specific forms of change with the construction of adequate 'models' of change in religious structures over time" (Ray, 1976, p 2).

In his 1975 publication, Shorter (1975, p 38-58) outlines at least eight approaches employed to study ATR: particularist, thematic, hypothesis of unity, historical, limited comparative, categorical, thematic and multidimensional. While some of these approaches, which can be closely linked to Ray's (op. cit.) three phases, are diverse and often conflicting, others are similar and may overlap. For the purpose of this paper, only the diverse approaches are discussed, not least because some of the other approaches overlap and could be described as emphases as opposed to discrete approaches used to study the religion.

1.1.1 Approaches used by African missionaries and explorers

Initial attempts to study ATR were undertaken largely by missionaries and explorers during the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries. Notwithstanding the fact that many of these authors did not stay long enough to observe and acquaint themselves with the beliefs and practices of Africans in any depth, they painted ATR as made up of complicated, bizarre, savage and primitive beliefs and practices. In 1931, Frobenius (p. XIII) recalled a passage in a Berlin Journal:

Before the introduction of genuine faith and a higher standard of culture by the Arabs, the natives [sic] have no political organization, nor, strictly speaking any religion... In examining the pre-Muhammedan condition of negro races, [we should] confine ourselves to the description of their fetishism, their brutal and often cannibalistic customs, their vulgar and repulsive idols. None but the most primitive instincts determine the lives and conduct of the negroes, who lacked any kind of ethical inspiration...

In his publication *Sources, with Particular Reference to the Southern Sudan*, Evans-Pritchard, (1971, p144-45) also recounts how travel reports from the region painted ATR as the beliefs of a savage and primitive people. They were, he noted, characterised by:

a reference to cannibalism, a description of pygmies (by preference with a passing reference to Herodotus), a denunciation of the inequities of the slave trade, the need for the civilizing influence of commerce, something about rain-makers and other superstitions, some sex (suggestive though discreet), add snakes and elephants to taste; bring slowly to the boil and serve.

Mbiti (1969, p 2-8) argues that these descriptions of ATR gave rise to its association with derogatory words such as fetishism and animism. According to Evans-Pritchard (1965, p 231-33), two prominent explorers, Sir Samuel Baker (1867) and Sir Richard Burton, contributed significantly to the propagation

of ATR as a crude/primitive religion. Baker argued in 1867 (in Evans-Pritchard, 1965, p 231) that “without any exception, they [Africans] are without a belief in a Supreme Being, neither have they any form of worship or idolatry; nor is the darkness of their minds enlightened by even a ray of superstition. The mind is as stagnant as the morass which forms its puny world”. Similarly, Sir Richard Burton (quoted in Evans-Pritchard, 1965, p 231) propagated ideas that “the negro is still at that rude dawn of faith – fetishism - and he [sic] has barely advanced to idolatry....He has never grasped the idea of a personal Deity, a duty in life, a moral code or a shame of lying...”

Though in more recent stages of the study of ATR, authors attempt to paint the religion in a more positive light, “unfortunately, such negative prejudices still haunt some learned minds to date. For example, Kenneth Clark begins his widely acclaimed survey [1969] of Western art by conjuring up a comparison between a Hellenistic statue of Apollo and an African ritual mask. The African mask, he suggests, embodies a lower state of civilization because it reflects a religious attitude of fear and darkness, while the Hellenistic statue reflects a loftier attitude of light and confidence” (Ray, 1976, p 5).

1.1.2 Evolutionist approaches

The later part of the 19th century was characterised by the doctrine of evolutionism, which had some influence on the study of ATR. This approach was concerned with tracing religion from its most primitive form to its highest level of development - considered to be monotheism. Ikenga-Metuh (1987) contends that this phase in the study of ATR was characterised by evolutionist theorists placing much emphasis on the study of the religion, not least because they believed their mission was to find examples of primitive forms of religion, which were considered to have survived in Africa, and, they believed, were actually evident in ATR. Authors in the evolutionist tradition used derogatory words such as fetishism, animism, totemism and polytheism to denote the supposedly primitive nature of ATR.

Central to evolutionist approaches to the study of ATR was evolutionist authors' view that all 'higher forms' of beliefs, concepts, institutions, art, or any aspect of culture were borrowed or imported from outside Africa. The result was the postulation of theories to explain how religious traits had found their way into the African sub-region from Western Europe, Egypt or the Middle East. For instance, Sir James Frazer (1922), in a monumental study of comparative folklore, magic and religion, attempted to draw parallels between the rites, beliefs, superstitions and taboos of early cultures and those of

Christianity. He argued, among other things, that the origin of the 'divine king' could be placed between the godless 'Age of Magic' and the later 'Age of Religion', which were differentiated by nature of the worship of spiritual beings. To Frazer (op. cit), the distinguishing feature of divine kingship was regicide, i.e. killing an ailing king to protect the divinity, of which he found the oldest and best examples in Africa. He further argued that symbols and rituals that come with divine kingship, such as scapegoat kings, mock-kings and ritual combat, were all later modifications of the earlier principle of regicide. Basing his primary ethnographic study on the Shilluk of Southern Sudan, and fitting his knowledge of myth and ritual in non-literate and ancient societies into his analysis, Frazer concluded, *inter alia*, that ATR is a primitive form of religion in comparison with Christianity.

The popularity of evolutionary theory declined in the twentieth century. According to Ray (1976, p 6), this was partly attributable to the discovery that certain non-literate people, particularly the hunter gatherers in Australia and North America, were actually capable of conceiving a "genuine notion of a supreme being despite their status as technologically primitive people". Ikenga-Metuh (1987, p 5-8) also argues that the evolutionary approach to the study of ATR phased out in part because some evolutionist authors, such as Andrew Lang and Wilhelm Schmidt, put forward compelling arguments that challenged monotheism as a more recent form of religion. These theorists argued that monotheism, rather than polytheism, was the earliest form of religion and that polytheism, fetishism and animism were later degenerations.

1.1.3 Anthropological approaches

The decline of evolutionist approaches to the study of ATR marked the beginning of anthropological approaches, which were facilitated by colonialism. Ikenga-Metuh (1987, p 5-8) argues that the colonial establishment created an environment in which anthropologists could undertake extensive fieldwork and documentation of the traditions, customs, beliefs and practices of Africans before these beliefs and practices could be 'contaminated' by foreign influences. Anthropological approaches to the study of ATR evolved in two distinct schools or national lines: British and French. This, according to Ray (op. cit. p 7), unfortunately "slanted fieldwork studies according to the nationality of the author, and thus imposed a 'colonialist' structure upon the study of African social and religious systems."

While British anthropologists were largely concerned with the sociological aspect of culture, kinship systems and political organization, French anthropologists were much more concerned with illuminating African cosmological systems and their implicit philosophical assumptions. For British ethnographers, the study of ATR aimed to understand its function in the social system - how religion was used to legitimate socio-political institutions, how rituals were used to sustain the social order, and how religious underpinnings highlighted the social structure. This functionalist approach to the study of ATR by British anthropologists later changed, with Evans-Pritchard's (1965) approach to understanding and explaining the meaning of African systems of ideas within their own universe. Analysing Nuer religion and Zande witchcraft, Evans-Pritchard emphasised the need to move away from studying religion vis-à-vis its sociological functions, and towards an understanding of concepts and cosmological beliefs through an analysis of the logical thought patterns of African people themselves.

French anthropologists, on the other hand, were far more concerned with highlighting African cosmologies to demonstrate that "African religious systems are not simply reflections of socioeconomic relations but that they form coherent and autonomous spheres of thought and action" (Ray, 1976, p 0). Hence, the French ethnographers regarded the African symbolic philosophical order as a determinant of the social structure, and the law, ethics, psychology and ritual of African societies.

1.1.4 Historical approach

Contemporary authors of studies of ATR argue that, until recently, the religion had not been considered from a historical angle, partly because of the lack of documentary sources and archaeological literature, and partly because of the bias of anthropology against history (Westerlund, 1991, p 15-23; Ikenga-Metuh, 1987, p 9; Ray, 1976, p 11). Western anthropologists presented an account of ATR that was a reflection of current social and economic conditions, rather than projecting the religion as something that was subject to change. Despite this, some Western anthropologists could not deny the fact that ATR had a history. Evans-Pritchard (1956, p 311), for instance, argues that:

Nuer religion, like any other, has of course a history, but we can only trace it in so far as it survives in the memories of the Nuer themselves, for reports by travellers, which start barely a century ago, are on this matter slight and unreliable. Ethnological research can supply us with indirect evidence; archaeological research, were it to be undertaken, probably with none at all.

In recent years, attempts have been made to capture cultural and religious changes in Africa. However, “because suitable historical information rarely exists in the published literature, much of it has to be provided by specially designed fieldwork projects, utilizing oral tradition, political history, and contemporary socioreligious analysis” (Ray, 1976, p 12). Edited collections on the history of ATR include: *The Historical Study of African Religion*, edited by Ranger and Kimambo (1972), and *The Study of Religions in Africa: Past, Present and Prospects*, edited by Jan Platvoet et al (1996).

1.1.5 Comparative approach

The comparative approach to the study of ATR has primarily been used by theologians and philosophers, to undertake a broad comparative study of strands within the religious tradition. However, authors in these two disciplines have largely neglected the socio-cultural context of African religious ideas and behaviour, which, according to Ray, has resulted in distorted and superficial representation of the religion (Ray, 1976, p 12).

1.2 Attempts by Africans to study ATR

Three groups of Africans have attempted to study ATR from the “inside”: amateur anthropologists, Christian theologians and historians. African amateur anthropological study of ATR was undertaken primarily by the few Western-educated African intellectuals who, motivated by nationalist sentiments, used elements of ethnography to study traditional religion. In the Gold Coast, for instance, young lawyers such as J. H. Mensah Sarbah (1968) and J.B. Danquah (1968) used elements of ethnography to study institutions of Fante traditional society and Akan culture/religion respectively. Though African anthropologists during the colonial era were “few and far between because of the stigma on anthropology of [being] too intimate an association with colonial enterprise” (Platvoet, 1996, p 121), two African anthropologists stand out: Jomo Kenyatta (1961) and Kofi Busia (1968). While Kenyatta (1961) undertook an anthropological study of Kikuyu society and religion, Busia (1968) used ethnography to analyse the Akan religious conception of Man and the Akan traditional religion. It should, however, be pointed out that these authors described the beliefs of ATR in a highly de-contextualised manner, incorporating their own personal Christian/post-Christian views into their assessment of ATR.

Unlike African anthropologists, African theologians have made a sizable contribution to the study of ATR, at least when judged by the number of publications. African theologians, such as John Mbiti (1970-1991), Bolaji Idowu (1970-1975), Ikenga-Metuh (1987), and Magesa (1998), among many others, have significantly contributed to presenting and canonising ATR as the indigenous religion of Africa. Despite the sizable contributions made by these African theologians, their methodological and theoretical approaches have been widely critiqued for being weak, especially those of the earlier generations (Platvoet, 1996, p 123-4). The main criticism rests on the idea that these African theologians perceived ATR from the worldview of the Western Christianity of the mainline churches, having been mostly trained in European and American Christian theologies. Their cultural function, according to Platvoet (1996, p 124) was “the restoration of a respectable religious past, thereby uplifting the self respect and dignity of the educated Africans *vis à vis* the dominant Western colonial culture... [their] political function was to help bring national unity in Africa’s ethnically plural societies which were rife with tensions, by de-emphasizing the differences between the religions and by highlighting the theistic beliefs they had in common”. These authors saw ATR as a pan-Africanist ideology of a ‘common Africanness’ (a cultural unity), an interpretation heavily influenced by Christianity, which postulates a monotheistic concept of God.

Idowu (1975, p 103-4), for instance, argues that the “real cohesive factor... [and] the ground [on which] we can speak of the religion of Africa in the singular” rests on the concept of a supreme God. Basing his arguments on Yoruba religious practices, Idowu (*op. cit.*) calls for a monotheistic interpretation of African religion. John Mbiti (1970) also makes an argument for a monotheistic interpretation of ATR by presenting a synoptic survey of African supreme beings in about three hundred societies. Amongst other things, he concludes that concepts of God in Africa evolved from an autonomous recognition of a Supreme Being, as also recognised in Judeo-Christian faith traditions. Like Idowu and other African theologians, Mbiti has been criticised for “attempting to lay the basis for a distinctively African theology by blending the African past with the Judeo-Christian tradition” (Ray, 1976, p 15).

A small but growing number of African historians are conducting research into ATR. This group is largely found within History Departments in African universities. Mainga (1972), for instance, traced the history of the Lozi royal cult in Barotseland, western Zambia, while Kimambo and Omari (1972) have made significant contributions by tracing rituals that were intended to produce political and territorial

integration among the Upare in north-eastern Tanzania in the pre-colonial period. Gwassa (1972) traced the religious history of the prophet Kinjikitile in the Maji Maji revolt against German colonial rule in Southern Tanganyika between 1905 and 1907. While these historians are among the few Africans studying ATR from a historical perspective, Platvoet (1996, p 127) argues that:

In the... nations of Anglophone Africa, the historical study of African Traditional Religions was impeded until recently by the hegemony of the comparative, synchronic, unitary ATR model. That paradigm was not only pan-Africanist in its ideology, but also de-contextualizing in its approach because of its religionist inspiration; because of the overriding need to use their [historians'] own research ... for the development of African (Christian) theologies; and because of the accepted divisions of fields of study in the academy which assigned their [historians'] historical study to (historical) anthropology, and to art, political, or social history, and the a-temporal, systematic, comparative, and crypto-theological one [sic] to Religious Studies.

To conclude this section, it is worth mentioning that recent years have seen an upsurge in the number of African scholars studying ATR. As an object of study, ATR is no longer dominated by outsiders (non-Africans), "for one reason because religions are important phenomena in all the societies of modern Africa; for another because some of the models of how to constitute a university in Africa allowed for the introduction of various sorts of study of religion(s) into some of them [sic]. So, African scholars of African religions are now contributing their part to the worldwide academic study of the religions of humankind in a substantive manner. They have taken their place in the global community of the academic study of religions" (Platvoet, op. cit. p 129). However, to produce critical discussions of ATR, such scholars need to adopt approaches that are not only self reflexive, but that also take a critical look at the complex historical realities of African religion, while being cognisant of personal biases and religious orientations.

Having presented earlier approaches to the study of ATR, the ensuing section attempts to define religion and culture, in order to illustrate the difficulty of separating the two, particularly in this short paper. In the definition of religion adopted here, and the overall discussions in this paper, I draw on the work of both African theologians and African and non-African ethnographers. Given that the study of ATR has been approached differently by different scholars, from different schools and with different pre-conceived ideas, the discussions in this review are inevitably influenced by the availability of studies of the particular issue under discussion and the available academic/non-academic voices on those issues.

2 Religion and culture: towards a definition

Religion is a difficult concept to define, not only because the objects of religion are spiritual beings that are invisible, but also because it is conceived differently by different people. In his proposal for a 'minimal definition' of religion, E.B. Taylor (in Ikenga-Metuh, 1987, p 3) defines religion as the belief in spiritual beings. This minimalist definition has been critiqued on the basis that "the object of religion need not be restricted to spiritual beings, presumably personified supernatural beings with the quality of life... [as] this would exclude impersonal supernatural powers (called Mana, Orenda or Nyama) which appear to be behind the objects of worship found among some peoples" (ibid, p 13). Ellis and Ter Haar (2004, p 14), however, cite Taylor approvingly, defining religion as "a belief in the existence of an invisible world, distinct but not separate from the visible one, that is home to spiritual beings with effective powers over the material world... implying the belief, common to most religious traditions, that effective communication is possible between the human and the spirit worlds".

In her attempt to provide a definition of religion, Wright (1971, p 439) proposes that:

Religions have secular and spiritual aspects, the secular being most frequently observed and reported in connection with political and social institutions or behavior. The spiritual aspect and the internal development of a belief system are comparatively inaccessible, but highly significant. Popular beliefs, as well as more formal ideological and theological tenets, fall under this category.

While acknowledging that religion always has a social dimension that needs to be studied and arguing that religious thought plays a key role in political life in Africa because the spirit world is considered the ultimate source of power, Ellis and Ter Haar assert that "it is essential to study in the first instance the ideas that motivate human action" (2004, p 14). Tamsin Bradley (2007, p 7) seems to agree, suggesting that religion can be "understood as providing beliefs relating to a spiritual or supernatural sphere. The source of these beliefs is a concept of the sacred. The sacred origins of ideas and values ensure that they possess an authority that restricts the degree to which they are challenged. The sacred is experienced by the believer and is often described in terms of a relationship with a divine being or spirit". This explanation of religion relates to the concept of culture. In fact, Bradley (op. cit. p 7) argues that the study of religion cannot be divorced from the study of culture, partly because religion is "treated as a space within which ideas are expressed that detail how people should lead their lives" (ibid, p 6). Culture, in turn, absorbs the varied religious beliefs of a people and translates them into the sociopolitical and economic spheres in the lives of the people.

While religion is anthropologically perceived as a ‘conceptual framework’ for providing greater appreciation of the world and the humans who inhere in it, culture is seen as the “mechanism by which [religious] beliefs are translated into social structures and practices shaping behaviour and determining how people relate to the world and to each other” (Bradley, 2007, p 7). According to Mbiti (1991a, p 7), culture covers a broad range of things, such as the way people live, behave and act, as well as their physical and intellectual achievements. Culture manifests in a people’s art, literature, language, dance, music, drama; the style through which they build their houses and dress; the way they organise socially and politically; their religious ideas, ethics, morals and philosophy; the way their customs, economic life and institutions of people are structured, and their values and ethics. People’s identity is bound up with their religion and their membership of various social groups. In Africa, the primary social groups are based on kinship and ethnicity, as well as co-residence – more recent identities such as those associated with contemporary national boundaries, are less salient for most. Although recognising that culture subsumes and expresses bases of social identity other than religion, particularly ethnicity, the latter is not discussed further in this paper.

Moreover, for the purpose of this review, I discuss ATR in terms of beliefs and practices without necessarily providing a separate space for discussing religion and culture as distinct conceptual entities. This is largely because religion is found in almost every sphere of Africans’ lives and societies. For instance, ATR, according to Mbiti (1991a), can be found in (a) rituals, ceremonies, festivals; (b) shrines, sacred places and religious objects; (c) art and symbols; (d) music and dance; (e) proverbs, riddles and wise sayings; (f) names of people and places; (g) myths and legends; (h) beliefs and customs; etc.

One can deduce from the above that ATR is an integral part of life, so much so that it has largely shaped the social life, political organisation, economic activities, the practice and growth of other religions and, most importantly, the culture of African societies. These factors in turn have informed the religious tradition.

3 ATR: homogeneity or multiplicity of indigenous religions?

A longstanding issue in analyses of ATR has been whether or not the beliefs and practices can accurately be regarded as a single religion or should be seen as a series of practices and expressions which reflect shared views of reality. Many scholars from diverse disciplines (anthropology, sociology and theology), some of whom have already been mentioned, have advanced compelling arguments to back their claims that ATR is a multiplicity of religions. Within this school of thought, African Christian theologians such as John Mbiti (1969, 1970) advocated a conception of the traditional religions of Africa as diverse religions. In an early publication, Mbiti (1969, p 1) argued that “we speak of African traditional religions in the plural because there are about one thousand African peoples (tribes), and each has its own religious system. These religions are a reality which calls for academic scrutiny and which must be reckoned with in modern fields of life like economics...” To Mbiti (1969), the fact that African people have different religious belief systems, rituals, ceremonies and leaders warrants consideration of these expressions as heterogeneous religions.

Similarly, Booth (1977, p 3) argues that:

Our reading and observation turn up a profusion of phenomena to which we may attach such labels as supreme gods [sic], nature spirits, ancestor rituals, initiation practices...and demons with considerable variety from place to place. Perhaps we will decide that there is no such thing as ‘African Religion’, but ‘African Religions.’

Contrary to the assertion that African Traditional Religion should be conceptualised as multiple religions, Magesa (1997, p 6) argues that ATR is a homogenous religion, which was recognised as far back as the early 1920s, when a study conference of missionaries in Le Zoute, Belgium, acknowledged its homogeneity. Though the Le Zoute conference recognised the diversities marking Africa geographically, linguistically, and sometimes in the physical appearance of its people, it concluded that there was an “essential unity: ‘underlying all the divergence that marks the pagan...Negro tribes, there is a fundamental unity of belief and outlook upon the world... Africa is a unity - a unity in diversity’” (ibid, p 6).

Similarly, J.V. Taylor (1963, quoted in Shorter 1975, p 48) argues that “... a careful look through actual observation and comparative discussions with Africans from various parts of the continent will show, first and foremost, that there is a common factor which the coined word *negritude* will express aptly. There is a common Africanness about the total culture and religious beliefs and practices of Africa.

This common factor may be due either to the fact of diffusions or to the fact that most Africans share common origins with regard to race and customs and religious practices”.

More recently, many African scholars claiming to study ATR from the ‘inside’, including John Mbiti himself (1990), who had previously challenged the homogeneity of ATR, tend to conclude that ATR should be considered a single religion with the same basic world-view, though its varying expressions cannot be denied. The varying elements in the religion, it is argued, are variations in expression rather than variations in basic belief system (Idowu, 1973; Maquet 1972; Parrinder, 1962). Bolaji Idowu (1973), for instance, argues that African traditional beliefs stem from one religious tradition and should be called African traditional religion. In a later publication, Mbiti (1991a) strongly advocates the study and conception of African traditional religion as a single religion, which he makes clear even in the title of his book *Introduction to African Traditional Religion*. His underlying argument is that ATR cuts across the African sub-region and shares remarkable features with respect to the basic world views of Africans.

These scholars contend that variety within a particular religion, as ATR has, does not imply that there is diversity in the fundamental beliefs and so is not grounds for regarding it as multiple religions. Thus ATR should be understood as a single religion, with diversity in its expressions and the implementation of its ideals by the different people of Africa. In fact, Magesa (op. cit. p 18) argues that:

If we study African Religion in a specific place among a specific ethnic group, as many scholars have done and still do - and, indeed, as it is necessary to continue to do - it is for the sake of depth and should not be used to support the argument that African Religion is not a generic whole. Obviously, the actual implementation of African religious ideals differs from place to place. This is illustrated most clearly by those religious expressions of African origin in the Diaspora, in Brazil, Surinam and the Caribbean, for instance. In spite of the fact that these peoples trace their ancestry to Africa through many generations, the African kernel of their religious thought-systems and expressions is unmistakable. Their religion has developed distinctive practices, and even borrowed from the Catholicism predominant in some of those regions. But they [sic] are still a form of African Traditional Religion...

Given that it is beyond the scope of this review to critically examine the various arguments surrounding the singularity or multiplicity of African religion(s), this review approaches ATR as a singular religion, based on the growing consensus among both ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ that ATR can be conceived in this way. At the same time, I am cognisant of the distinctive practices and expression of ideals amongst the different peoples of Africa and draw on appropriate examples to illustrate this point.

4 ATR: a definition

Having summarised the debate over whether ATR is a homogenous religion or multiple religions, the legitimate question to ask is: what then is ATR? According to Stamer (1995, p 121-125), ATR, despite its diverse forms of expression, is

“...a global framework of life, encompassing every human situation and governing the whole of society. It is closely linked to the ancestral soil and places each African both in the succession of the generations (the ancestors), in his [sic] relationship with his fellow creatures and in his productive activities. Everything is religious! The direct relation with God is rarely explicit but the belief in one God, Who is Creator ... underlies everything else. God does not intervene in the day-to-day affairs of life. These are governed by other invisible forces, good or evil, from whom it is possible to win favours through the ritualised experience of the ancestors. Strict observation of the rites and taboos and total solidarity within the group are the best guarantee of group survival and the transmission of life to numerous descendants. Seen from the outside, constraint and fear seem to be the dominant notes of traditional African religion, but this would be to forget that it offers an overall framework of security in an often very hostile environment, where only the survival of the group ultimately counts”.

Mbiti (1991a, p11-13) proposes five interrelated elements:

- Beliefs - these are an essential part of ATR, expressing how and what Africans think of the universe and their attitude towards life, and connected with belief in God, spirits, human life, magic and life after death.
- Practices, ceremonies, and festivals - these manifest in the way people express their beliefs, and include prayers, sacrifices and offerings, ceremonies, rituals and the observance of various customs.
- Religious objects and places - these are objects and places regarded as holy or sacred, which are rarely used except for religious purposes. While some of these objects and places could be man-made, others are taken from the natural environment, such as trees.
- Values and morals - these are religious ideas which provide directions to people on how to lead their lives and how to relate to one another. They include issues such as love, justice, decency, crime and punishment, character, good and evil, integrity.
- Religious officials or leaders - these are individuals, mostly trained, who conduct religious matters, such as ceremonies, sacrifices, rituals, formal prayers and divination.

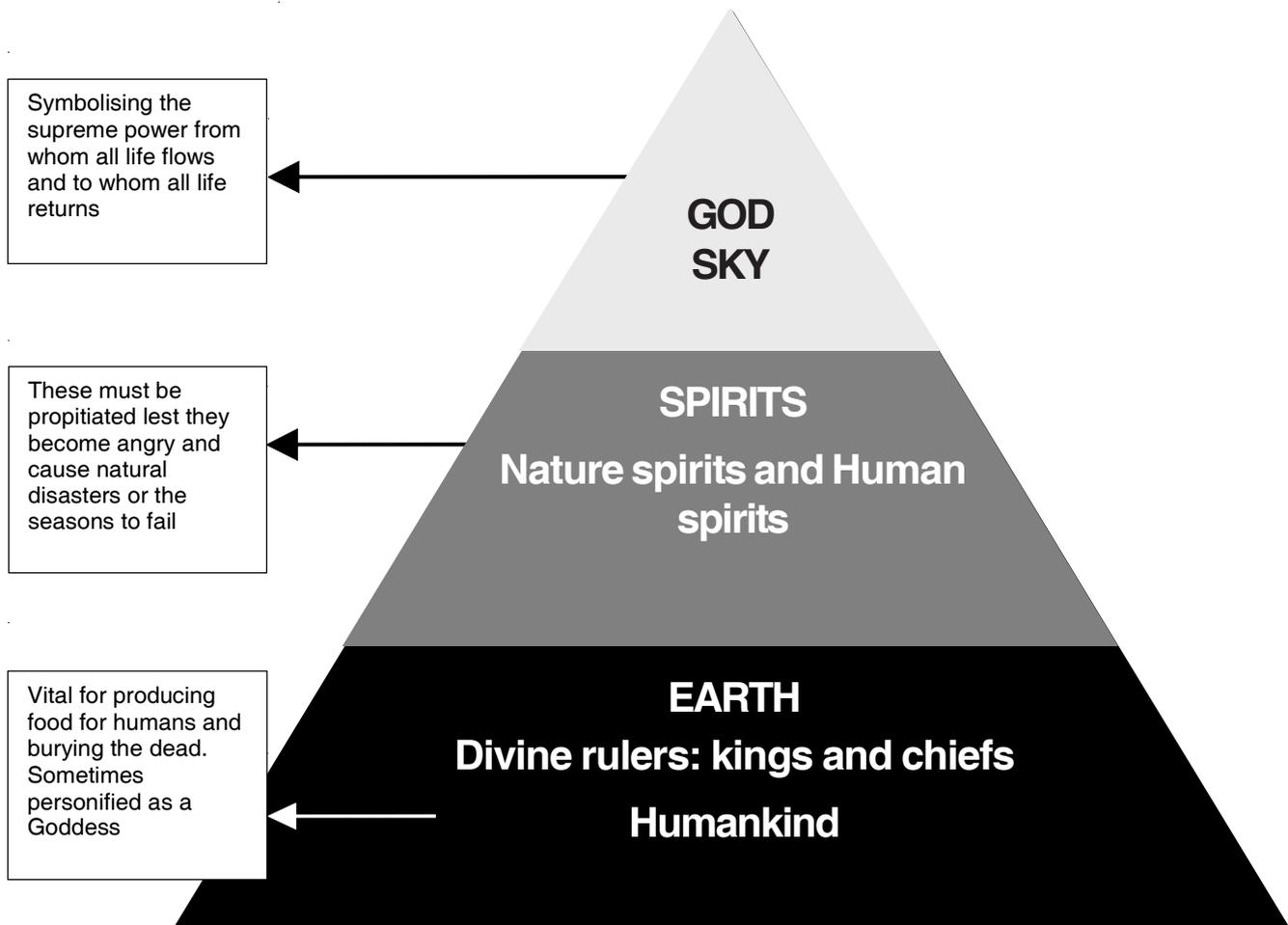
In his attempts to define ATR, Ikenga-Metuh (1987, p 17) also draws on the beliefs and practices of Africans, and defines ATR as “institutionalized patterns of beliefs and worship practiced by various African societies from time immemorial in response to the ‘Supernatural’ as manifested in their environment and practice”.

It should be highlighted here that these definitions elucidate ATR as encompassing beliefs and practices that originate from Africa and have existed since the beginning of Africa's known history. Despite variations in the peoples, societies, linguistic groups and cultures of Africa, the above definitions point to certain commonalities in the ontological and cosmological perspectives of Africans across the region. These commonalities, according to Ashanti (1997, p 12), are manifest in two ways: "first within the form of the rites and rituals practiced, and second - but not always - within the content of these same rituals and rites". It is on this basis that more and more authors are embracing the idea of ATR being a single religion, which has basic features that underpin the wide spectrum of African religious practices. These features are: the concept of one supreme God, the deities, spirit forces and the living dead/ancestors.

As these represent the fundamental features underlying ATR, it is useful to re-echo Mbiti's (1969) comment that Africans have a distinct religious ontology, an ontology which is 'anthropocentric', in that everything is perceived in terms of its relationship with people. For instance, God is the creator and sustainer of humankind; spirits provide explanations for the destiny of humankind; while the animals, plants and other natural phenomena provide the environment to support humanity's existence and with whom humanity establishes a mystical relationship. For Africans, "this anthropocentric ontology is a complete unity which nothing can break up or destroy. To destroy or remove one of [the above structures] is to destroy the whole [of] existence including the destruction of the creator, which is impossible. One mode of existence presupposes all the others, and a balance must be maintained so that these modes neither drift too far apart from one another nor get too close to one another" (Mbiti, 1969, p16).

Though God is the creator and controller of a divine force, energy or power which permeates the universe, the spirits have access to this power, and are thought to be capable of using it. Other human beings, such as medicine men and women, witches³, priests, priestesses and so on, have partial knowledge of the power, into which, it is believed, they can tap and which they can manipulate for their own purposes, either good or ill. Animals and plants also have spiritual force, though the strength of their force is believed to be lower than that of humankind (Parrinder, 1962).

This belief system can be summarised diagrammatically as a hierarchy, as shown in Figure 1, each element of which will be discussed further in sub-sections 4.1 to 4.4.

Figure 1: ATR belief structures

Source: author's own construct.

4.1 God

In the diagram above, the sky symbolises God, used interchangeably with Supreme Being. God is referred to as Ngewo by the Mende people of Sierra Leone and Nyame by the Ashanti of central Ghana. The names Nyam, Nyonmo and Nyama are widely used across West Africa to refer to God, while names such as Nzambi and Nyambe are used for God across Central and Southern Africa (Parrinder, 1974, p 33). For people such as the Mende, God is the author of all life forms, including the spirit world. For the Kono people of Sierra Leone, God represents the omnipresent and the eternal, living in the sky but also living “through all the generations of man” (Parrinder, 1974, p 33).

The Supreme Being commonly has many attributes: omnipresent, omnipotent, transcendent and immanent, among others. The omnipresence of the Supreme Being is associated with certain objects, events and phenomena. The Gikuyu of Kenya, for instance, associate certain sacred mountains with the presence of God. These are designated resting sites for God on earth, though they acknowledge that no one knows exactly where God resides. While the Lango associate hills with the presence of God and, for that matter, refrain from building their homes close to hills, the Banyarwanda believe that God is everywhere, though his presence is particularly associated with “every terrifying place”, such as a desolate and deserted place (Mbiti, 1970, p 3-10).

The attribute of God as omnipotent is conceived differently in different African societies. The Zulu, for instance, describe God as the “irresistible, He [sic] who bends down... even majesties, and He who roars so that all nations be struck with terror” (Mbiti, 1970, p 9). The Abaluyia, on the other hand, conceive of God’s omnipotence differently, as they believe God is powerful enough to change the natural laws which God established, and, in response, they need to continuously offer prayers that God not change natural laws/phenomena (Ibid).

While some writers on the Ashanti of Ghana speak of their conception of God as a female, the Great Mother, symbolised by the moon, others speak of God among the Ashanti as having a duality of sex, Father-Mother God, who is symbolised by the sun. According to an Ashanti myth, Nyame rules over the sky, a goddess of creation over the Earth, and Old Mother Earth over the underworld, that is over the dead who lie buried in her pocket [in their graves] (Parrinder, 1974, p 33). The Yoruba refer to God as Olurun, meaning the owner of the sky, while the Kikuyu refer to the Supreme God as Murungu, who is invisible and associated with the sky. It should be pointed out here that almost all the literature reviewed for this paper masculinises God, and often uses “him” as opposed to “her”. As to whether the masculinisation of God in the literature is an accurate reflection of the way Africans conceive of God or whether it is a conception of God interpreted through the lens of the Judeo-Christian tradition is an open debate which is beyond the scope of this paper.

In much of Africa, temples and priests/priestesses are few and there is no regular communal worship of God, with notable exceptions, such as the Dogon, Ashanti and Kikuyu. The Dogon of Mali, for instance, have group altars for Amma (God), which are communally owned and officiated over by the

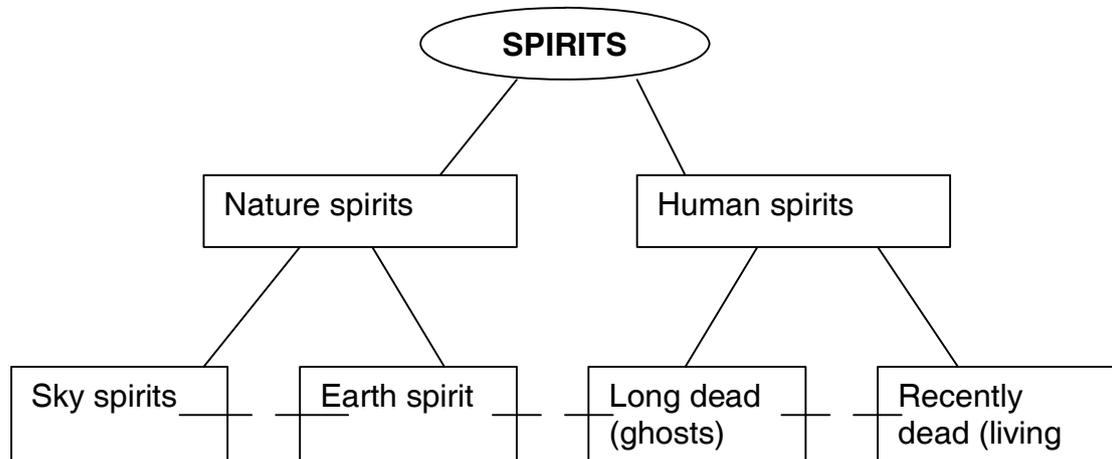
chief. The Ashanti have temples for Nyame in old palaces, headed by priests and priestesses, while the Kikuyu worship Murungu at designated shrines under sacred fir-trees and groves⁴. However, individuals can generally pray individually to the Supreme God, especially in times of calamity and great need (Wilson, 1971, p 27-35).

The Supreme Being is worshipped, either directly or indirectly, through various forms of sacrifices, offerings and ceremonies. Some worship God directly; others, such as the Leza in Zambia, worship God through intermediaries such as lesser divinities, as God is considered to be too far away and fearful to approach directly.

4.2 Spirits

The next in the hierarchy of ATR belief structures, as shown in Figure 1, are spirits. Spirits are divided into nature spirits and human spirits. According to Mbiti (1990) and Ikenga-Metuh (1987), spirits are creations of God, and occupy a status between God and humans, though they are not identical to either. There are different types of spirits, all of which are subordinate to God and dependent on God. Africans propitiate and communicate with spirits primarily because they are considered powerful enough to bring harm or good to a given people: “If, as many Africans believe, both human suffering and human prosperity have their origins in relations with the spirit world, cultivating that relationship assumes great importance” (Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004, p. 51). So the living constantly seek to please them, to win their favour, and to avert their wrath. Not only within ATR, but also amongst adherents of other faith traditions, there is “a propensity towards a belief in the existence of distinct spirits, conceived of as entities that are invisible yet real. In African religious traditions, the representation of spirits as real beings emphasises the personal rather than the metaphorical aspect of relationships between the visible and invisible worlds” (Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004, p 52). People believe that they can communicate with the spirit world through prayer, divination, dreams and visions, or possession, although some are thought to be more able to communicate than others.

Figure 2 below illustrates the various types of spirits in African cosmology, which will be discussed in turn.

Figure 2: Types of spirits

Adapted from Mbiti (1991a, p. 90)

4.2.1 *Nature spirits*

Beliefs in nature spirits are not widespread in Africa. While Central and Southern African people have generally not developed a strong belief in nature spirits, West Africans, with few exceptions such as Sierra Leonean tribes, generally have large pantheons of nature spirits who are worshipped (Parrinder, 1974, p 43). Mbiti (1991a, p 71) argues that nature spirits are personifications of natural objects and forces, in that people ascribe personal characteristics to certain objects and forces of the universe. In this respect, they treat these objects and forces “as if they were living, intelligent beings of the invisible world”.

Nature spirits can be subdivided into spirits of the sky and spirits of the earth. Spirits of the sky comprise the sun, moon, stars, rainbow, rain, storm, thunder, lightning, wind, etc. While some African societies believe spirits reside in these natural objects and forces, others believe that these natural objects and forces themselves are spirits. The Mende of Sierra Leone, for instance, believe in spirits (or genii) residing in rivers and forests. Storm spirits, particularly in West Africa, are considered divinities and are held responsible for calamities such as storms, lightning, thunder and thunderbolts. These spirits, among the Yoruba and Ibo of Nigeria and the Ewe of Dahomey and Ghana, are feared

as the most dreadful and worshipped as the most powerful of divinities because of their power to unleash lightning, storms and thunder (Ray, 1976, p 23-85; Parrinder, 1974, p 51). In the African cosmology, myths, symbols and legends are used to illuminate the origin, activities and relationships of these spirits to human beings. Offerings and sacrifices are often made to them either asking for their direct help or to relay the people's requests to God.

Nature spirits of the earth are associated with earthly forces and objects, such as the earth, hills, mountains, boulders, trees, forests, metals, animals, and insects, certain diseases⁵, water in different forms - lakes, the sea, ponds, rivers etc. These nature spirits obtain different status in different African societies. For instance, while the earth is revered in some African societies, it is not personified as a deity or divinity in other societies. Among the Tellensi of Northern Ghana, for instance, the earth is considered "a living thing" in which spirits inhere, and as such they revere the earth. On the other hand, the Ashanti of Central Ghana do not believe the earth is divine, hence a deity, despite the fact that they still regard the earth as a mystical power. They believe the earth is capable of exacting punitive sanctions. Among tribes such as the Ibo of Nigeria, however, the earth deity (Ala or Ane) is regarded as an important goddess to whom rites and sacrifices are offered (Parrinder, 1964, p 47-50).

Apart from the earth, some African societies believe spirits live in water bodies or that those water bodies are spirits themselves. Some worship these water bodies, such as lakes, springs, rivers, wells and the sea, as deities/divinities. They are regarded as highly sacred because they are believed to host spirits. The Ashanti, for instance, believe that their greatest nature spirit, who is worshipped and has numerous temples and priests, lives in the Tano (a river in the region). Lake Bamblime in Cameroon, said to possess a powerful spirit, is considered a female deity. The Yoruba's Sea God—Olokun - is offered many rites and sacrifices to propitiate and bind the restless waves of the sea (Ray, 1976, p 23-85; Parrinder, 1974, p 51).

Hills are another nature spirit of the earth, thought to contain spirits and revered accordingly. The people of Ibadan in Nigeria, for instance, describe the hill goddess as the tutelary divinity of the town. Spirits are also believed to live in trees, such as the Iroko and Baobab trees (Parrinder, 1964, p 47).

4.2.2 *Human spirits*

Mbiti (1991a, p 75-77) argues that human spirits are thought to have a direct physical relationship with the living. These spirits were once ordinary people living on earth, and since they expired they have been worshipped, venerated, invoked and revered. Human spirits are divided into spirits of relatives who died long ago and have become ghosts, and those who recently died. While the spirits of those who died generations ago are invoked, the actual memory of the deceased has often been erased from the personal memory of the living because they died so long ago. Their stories are often told in myths, legends, folklore and spirit possessions (ibid, p 75-77). On the other hand, people who have died recently are often remembered for up to five generations by their families, relatives and friends. Their spirits are often called the living dead to distinguish them from ghosts who died many generations ago and can only be remembered through folklore, myths or legends.

Belief in the living dead, used interchangeably with ancestors, is pervasive in Africa, though it is much stronger in some societies than others. The spirits of the living dead are revered and communicated with. They are regarded as ever-living and watchful beings who possess powers which are useful to humans, thus making it necessary to seek their blessings or avert their anger by due offerings (Ashanti, 1997, p 10-14; Mbiti, 1991a, p 75-6; Parrinder, 1962, p 24). Ray (1976, p 23-85) argues that the spirits of the living dead are a vital part of the dynasty of belief in ATR. The spirits of the living dead are believed to possess powers that can harm or help surviving relatives. Rites and offerings are made to the ancestors, who are feared, revered and considered as divinities. Among the Bantu, for instance, Parrinder (1974, p 57) argues that the ancestors are considered the most intimate of deities. The Ibos in Nigeria believe their lives are influenced by their ancestors, while in Sierra Leone, “prayer is normally offered through a succession of ancestors... [including] those ancestors whose names and feats are known [the living dead]... and those who died in the far distant past” (ibid, p 57).

4.3 **Divine rulers**

In many parts of Africa, rulers, kings or chiefs have religious connotations. In the hierarchy of belief, kings and chiefs are perceived as God’s representatives on earth. For instance, the Bantu people of South Africa perceive their chiefs as symbols of tribal unity. Each chief is simultaneously a magician, priest, lawmaker and ruler, while the “Zulu, in the time of famous Chaka, raised the king to a godlike eminence” (Parrinder, 1974, p 67). Among the Swazi, “the king and his mother are the head of the

hierarchy of mortals” (Ibid, p 69). While the king is called the child of the people, his mother is called mother of the country. In many western African tribes, renowned monarchies, such as those of Benin, Yoruba and Ashanti, were given quasi-divine honours and revered as religious symbols of God.

4.4 Humankind

At the bottom of the hierarchy are humans, as anthropocentric objects, whose relationships and existence is connected to the Supreme God, divinities and ancestors. Humans perform rites and rituals to invoke the Supreme God, the deities and ancestors, in the hope that this will avert calamities and bless them in their productive and reproductive activities. People have constant contact with the divinities, including the ancestors, at every stage in their life cycle. Rites of passage are undertaken to mark various stages in the life cycle of women and men. These transitional rites reflect the transition from one stage of life to the other. For instance, Africans have rites associated with pregnancy, birth, puberty, marriage and death. These rites of passage create a bond between “temporal processes and archetypal patterns in order to give form and meaning to human events. This is done according to a threefold ritual pattern consisting of rites of separation, transition, and reincorporation. The specific object of rituals of passage is to create fixed and meaningful transformation in the life cycle (planting, marriage, death) in the ecological and temporal cycle (planting, harvest, seasonal changes, New Year) and in accession of individuals to high office” (Ray, 1977, p 90-1).

Rites of passage therefore mark a symbolic destruction of an old person/event and the creation of a new person or event. By this rite, a person or a people are reborn into new beings with new social roles ascribed to them. For instance, rites at birth mark the making of a child into a human person, puberty rites marks the transition from childhood into adulthood, marriage rites marks transition from woman and man into wife and husband, and death rites mark the transition from the living to revered ancestors.

Given the humanist view of the self/person, the question is: what then is the concept of the self/person in ATR? Ray (1976, p 133) argues that Africans conceive a person as striking a balance between themselves as a unique individual and their collective identity as a member of society. Similarly, Mbiti (quoted in Ray, p 133) argues that African philosophy lends itself to defining individuals in terms of their

social groups. A person is thought of as a constituent element of a community, by which “the individual is conscious of himself [sic] in terms of ‘I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am’...”

Ray (op. cit.) acknowledges that the collectivist nature of African societies notwithstanding, there is recognition of the fact that each individual is a unique person endowed with a distinct personality and capabilities by God, and motivated by her/his own personal needs. To this extent “African thought acknowledges the transcendence of individuals over their own sociocultural conditions. However, the emphasis upon a person’s individuality and freedom is always balanced against the social and historical context. It never approximates the Western notion of individualism - the idea that men [sic] are essentially independent of their social and historical circumstances - [as] the African traditional worldview is too systematic for such a doctrine, too logically and dynamically integrated” (Ray, 1976, p 132).

5 Concepts of evil spirits, witches and sorcerers

One of the fundamental beliefs in ATR is the belief in evil spirits, witches and sorcerers. Inasmuch as African traditional religion is concerned with the quest for good, it is also concerned with the quest to ward off evil. To Africans, evil is both physical and moral. While the former is regarded as any misfortune which befalls an individual or community, the latter is conceived as “any voluntary anti-social behaviour or any infringement of the decrees of God, the deities, or the ancestors” (Ikenga-Metuh, 1987, p 161). In the belief structure of ATR, there are two categorisations of evil, those that cause physical evil and those that incite people to do evil. Within certain African cosmologies, unusual events are often attributed to mystical agencies. While some Africans attribute misfortunes to the work of evil spirits, witches or sorcerers, others associate misfortunes with an evil eye, broken taboos, perjured oaths or even God (Ibid, p 161). Also, while some mystical agencies are regarded as just and fundamentally good, such as God, the deities and ancestors, other mystical agencies, such as witches, sorcerers, and evil spirits, are regarded as unjust and evil. Ikenga-Metuh (op. cit.) argues that though most African societies regard God, deities and ancestors as good and just, these mystical agencies could actually inflict physical evil as a premonitive, corrective or punitive measure. Meek (1937, p 22), for instance, argues that among the Igbo, when one is struck by lightning, the person is not mourned, as the death is regarded as punishment by the Igbo thunder deity, Amadioha, for a sin committed.

The other category of mystical agencies, evil spirits, witches and sorcerers, unlike the just and good mystical powers, exist to cause evil. Some evil spirits, for instance, are believed to be disincarnate human spirits, while others are non-human spirits who attack individuals, families and communities. While some of these evil spirits are conceived as deities in some societies, other evil spirits are not perceived as such. Also, while some evil spirits are seen as individual spirits, others are argued to be groups of evil spirits. For instance, the Igbo, according to Ikenga Metuh (op. cit. p167), have three classifications of evil spirits of the dead: evil spirits of children (Umu Aro), evil spirits of dead young men (Ogbonuke), and evil spirits of adults who died without offspring (Akalogeli). Lucas (1970, p 168) argues that evil spirits of young children are feared the most by young mothers, as the spirits of these children form “a confraternity of spirits who visit the world in incarnate form for short periods, the length of each being pre-arranged. The spirits are born into babies who will die in infancy or boyhood [sic]”. Idowu (1962, p 80), on the other hand, describes these evil spirits as “wandering spirits who specialize in the sadistic mischief of finding their way into wombs to be born to die”.

In addition to God, the deities, ancestors and evil spirits, some African people believe that human agencies of evil, such as witches and sorcerers, are also capable of causing misfortune. Witchcraft implies a perception of spiritual power employed by humans in an evil manner or for evil purposes and should be distinguished from witchcraft accusations, which in Africa like the rest of the world, are often used for scapegoating or in a manipulative way to obtain revenge or self-advancement, with dramatic social and political consequences in the form of assault, killing and expulsion (Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004)..Ikenga-Metuh (op. ct. p 169) argues that though protective medicines and charms are good medicines, these can be used by evil sorcerers to obtain their “wicked anti-social ends. Similarly, oaths, ordeals and oracles are good but they can bring devastating consequences to perjurers”. According to Mbiti (1969, p 202), witches often attack unceremoniously and unprovoked. Their attack is believed by people to be unjust.

It is perhaps worth pointing out the difference between witches and sorcerers at this juncture. Ikenga-Metuh (op. cit. p 170) argues that the difference between witches and sorcerers differs among African societies. For instance, the primary difference between a witch and a sorcerer among the Azande is that a sorcerer “achieves his ends by magic, whereas a witch (often though not invariably conceived of as a woman) achieves hers by some mystical power inherent in her personality, a power that does not require the help of magic. As to motive, witches are considered to be slaves of aberration and addiction, and thus conceived [of as] weird, sometimes tragic figures”. On the other hand, sorcerers are conceived as ordinary people driven by “understandable, even if disapproved urges such as malice envy or revenge, which are part of everyone’s experience” (Ikenga-Metuh, op. ct. p 170).

The Tiv of Nigeria, while also clearly making a distinction between witches and sorcerers, believe that witches are men (called mbatsav) with *tsav* or witchcraft substance, while sorcerers are men who make bad medicine - *Ichighi* (ibid, p 171). Note that while the Azande believe witches are largely women, the Tiv believe witches are primarily men. Ikenga-Metuh (op. cit. p 171) argues that the Tiv believe that sorcerers can use medicine for good - such as curing diseases - or for bad, such as putting harmful concoctions in the food or drinks of people. Witches, on the other hand, are believed to centre round a “vital and mysterious power or force called Tsav [which] is a vital power that exists in men that can be employed for either strengthening life and ensuring prosperity or for the destruction or weakening of life”.

Spirit possession is considered to be a way in which communication is opened up with a world beyond ordinary human experience and may be considered either good or evil: “possession by a desirable spirit accommodated through mediumship, and possession by spirits that cause harm and have to be expelled by exorcisers” (Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004, p. 58). Ellis and Ter Haar (2004, p 56) detect changes in people’s relationships with the spirit world. They note that in the past ATR “ascribed to the spiritual powers of the invisible world a morally neutral character, instead of considering them intrinsically good or evil. Rather, the moral nature of spirits traditionally depends on the relationship between human beings and the spirit world with which they interact.... whereas people once considered spirits to be morally neutral forces that could be used for particular purposes ..., many have come to see traditional spirits as being harmful by nature”, and evil as pervasive, giving rise to a requirement for new techniques for interaction and propitiation.

6 Religious practices, ceremonies and festivals

Having outlined the religious beliefs in ATR, this section summarises other aspects of African traditional religion, religious practices, ceremonies and festivals, as they form a vital part of ATR. Ray (1976) argues that ATR is a communal religion, not a personal one, especially with respect to humans' interaction and relationship with the sacred. As a result, rituals, ceremonies and festivals, often officiated over by spiritual specialists, diviners and kings etc., are used to mediate between the sacred and the people. They are used to bridge the world of humans and that of the divine. Every "sacrifice is a re-creation of the group's identity, every rite of passage a reforging of the corporate life" (ibid, p 17). Rituals are used primarily to communicate with the divine in order to change a particular human situation. This gives two dimensions to rituals in ATR: what rituals say, and what they do. The words and symbols expressed during rituals often offer clues to what is being done, while the ritual act itself is believed to be conducted for practical purposes such as curing sickness, calling for rain, increasing fertility and the harvest, and defeat of enemies (ibid, p 78).

In ATR, there are two primary aspects of rituals: animal sacrifice and rites of passage. Both of these consist of ritual recital (what is said during rituals) and actions (what the ritual is believed to do). The Yoruba, for instance, regard Ogun as the patron of deity hunters, and as such, the Ogun festival is often held during the dry season when there is good hunting. During this festival, animals are sacrificed by family heads, with the Ogun priest officiating over the ceremony. This period is marked by tranquility, when men and women refrain from cursing, sexual intercourse and eating certain foods. The ceremony is to attract Ogun's attention, to encourage him to shower them with blessings (ibid, p 81). Rituals are also used to maintain and re-establish harmonious relationships with the spiritual beings considered to be in control of fertility. This, according to Kilson (1976, p 136), is grounded in the quest for fertility, explicitly "in the aims of communal cults (eg. Swazi, Yoruba, Gnada, Nyakyusa and Yako) and implicit in those [religious rituals] seeking to control rain that fruitifies the land (e.g. Azande, Mende, Lamba, Safwa ...)".

In general, rituals in ATR follow a structure of consecration, invocation-immolation, and communication-purification, while their social function is to bring people together and reinforce moral and social bonds. Bradley (2007, p 35) argues that "rituals allow for changes in collective and individual perceptions to be monitored... and can also offer explanations of why social, political and economic changes do or do not occur"⁶.

7 ATR and concepts of development

Having summarised the basic belief system permeating the African sub-continent, the ensuing section takes a number of concepts of development and discusses them vis-à-vis ATR, i.e. how ATR, as a religion, addresses these issues. By so doing, this review hopes to point out how the religion influences or could influence individuals and communities in their attitudes and relationships towards these key issues in development.

It should be reiterated here that a search for literature on ATR and ‘development’ failed to produce relevant materials. Much of the literature deals with the fundamental structures of belief in ATR and related religious practices, as summarised above. A few sources deal with ATR’s conception of morality, which is steeped in tradition and flows from the belief system. These are reviewed in Section 7.1. The tradition’s views on ‘development concepts and practices’ are revealed indirectly, through ideas about how conflict can be handled and justice secured, political authority and ethical behaviour, the rights and responsibilities related to property ownership and gender roles and relationships. These are discussed in Sections 7.2 to 7.5. Ideas about knowledge and health also form part of the tradition, but space constraints prevent these being explored in this paper.

7.1 Moral and ethical values in ATR

Before one can consider social conflict, crime and justice, ethical behaviour in the public sphere, property ownership and gender roles and relationships, it is important to first situate morality within the belief system, as this will enable the ways in which Africans perceive and express themselves as individuals and as collective groups to be appreciated. According to Mbon (1991, p 101-9), ethics in Africa encompass every aspect of life. They tend to govern individuals’ understanding of themselves and their relationships with others. Ethics are expressed in the daily conversations of individuals, group proverbs, myths, folklore and names, which spell out people’s ideas, aspirations and philosophies of life. For Africans, ethical standpoints are manifest in the norms that regulate relationships between individual members of society and their social groups. Ikenga-Metuh (op. cit. p 243) contends that the concept of morality in African societies can be identified “from the sanctions or commendations attaching [to]... the infringement or observance of [social] norms”. Thus, African concepts of morality emerge from humans’ relationship with God and the ontological order. Myths of creation explain how God created humans and they in turn betrayed God by either revealing God’s secret of creation (a Tutsi myth) or eating God’s food (a Mende myth), which subsequently led to the

disruption of the ontological order and resulted in both moral evil and physical evil becoming permanent features of the world (Ibid).

Mbiti (1991a, p 174) also argues that morality in ATR deals with conceptions of what is right and wrong, good or evil, and is based on a belief in many African societies that morals are given by God. He identifies two kinds of morals, both of which deal with human conduct: personal conduct and social conduct. While personal conduct deals directly with an individual's personal life, for instance a person may ask themselves whether it is right or wrong to eat a particular food, social conduct largely deals with an individual's conduct within their social group or community. The latter, according to Mbiti (1991a, p 174), is where African morals lay most emphasis, "since a basic African view is that the individual exists only because others exist".

Harry Sawyer (in Mbon, 1991, p 102) reinforces Mbiti's argument, asserting that moral norms hold that "the behaviour of the individual without exception is right or wrong according as it affects the group - sometimes a closer, nuclear family group; at other times, a wider circle of extended families and friends". This was particularly so if the "act of the individual was one that offended the gods [sic] or ancestral spirits. Examples of social acts that would be offensive to the divine spirits and the society included stealing, cheating, murder, incest or any of the ancestor-sanctioned rules governing and guiding the social and religious life of the community" (Mbon, 1991, p 102).

Having presented this concise view of morality in the African tradition, one should also point out that there has long been contention over whether Africans have a moral sense that reflects a perception of goodness or badness rather than mere adherence to individual norms or prohibitions, and whether that perception of good and evil has a religious basis. Some, such as Krige and Krige (1954, p 72), present compelling arguments to suggest that 'the African moral view' is governed not by the dictates of conscience or any deeply internalised divine law, but by blind conformity with customs and traditions, including prohibitions by the ancestors or taboos. Krige and Krige (op. cit. p 72) present examples of norms which derive their binding force from customs and traditions. For instance, for the Lovedu, burning a particular type of wood is believed to bring about quarrels; working in the fields the day after rain is believed to bring misfortunes; and sleeping with a wife while she is still breastfeeding may cause the death of the child.

Others, such as Ikenga-Metuh (op. cit. p 244), argue that “these observations... are generalizations which distort the true image of African morality”. In support of a religious basis for moral norms, Ray (op. cit., p 147) argues that “ancestors constitute the basic categories of moral and legal thought. This raises them above the transitory human level and invests them with sacred significance... the rights and duties sanctioned by the ancestors both define and regulate basic [moral behaviour that governs] social and political relations”. In this school of thought, Wilson (1971, p 77) also argues that there is a direct connection between morality and religion. “Such a direct connection has been denied by a formidable array of scholars reflecting on anthropological material, and even by some field-workers, whose own evidence confounds them. The connection can be denied, or called vague or indirect only if the symbolism is not understood, or morality is narrowly interpreted” (ibid, p 76). Wilson (op. cit. p 77) supports this argument with an example from the Nyakyusa whom he studied. He argues that the basis of morality among the Nyakyusa was

“the fulfillment of obligations to kinsmen, living and dead, and to neighbours, showing respect to seniors and fulfilling obligations to dependants. Fertility was the ultimate value, and it was injured by evil-doers. The behaviour judged to be immoral was first, anger, brooding anger, unconfessed, that might drive a man [sic] to use witchcraft or sorcery; secondly, quarrelling between kinsmen which angered the shades [mystical agencies]; thirdly, disrespect to a senior kinsman, whether living or dead” (Wilson, op. cit. p 77).

Ikenga-Metuh (op. cit.) also argues that there is a basic moral consciousness among African people, as depicted in certain maxims. He argues, for instance, that sayings such as “a man [sic] who eats his word, breaks his oath, or violates the blood bond, or commits a personal moral fault” are all indicators of a deep moral consciousness. He further argues that an Akan proverb which says that “you may not see yourself growing up, but you definitely know it when you do wrong” provides a strong justification of the presence of moral consciousness.

Idowu (1962, p 154) agrees, arguing that the Yoruba word for consciousness is *ifa aya* (the oracle of the heart), which is believed to be inserted into humans by God to enable them to live moral lives. Whether one lives a morally good or bad life is contingent on how the individual responds to their *ifa aya*. Among the Yoruba therefore, a person who behaves wickedly or shamelessly is told “he [sic] has no sense or shame, he has no oracle of the heart”. Similarly, Maquet (1954, p 183) illustrates that, in Rwanda, consciousness is termed *kamera* (something felt internally) and is said to be situated in the

heart. The Banyarwanda, according to Maquet (op. cit.), have a deep sense of honour and self esteem and the shame of being named as a person without self esteem suffices to deter people from breaching rules of conduct. Moreover, the Banyarwanda believe that if an individual transgresses a particular rule, they will feel the wickedness of their deeds even if the deed is committed without the knowledge of a second party (Maquet, op. cit.).

The above briefly illustrates the polarised debates over African moral consciousness. It is not within the remit of this review to try and judge objectively whether moral consciousness is present in African societies. Whether, when an individual acts in ways perceived as right or wrong or pronounces judgements on whether an action is good or bad, he or she is acting in accordance with customs and taboos, a moral consciousness, or fear of mystical sanctions is not within the scope of this review to judge. In any case, these are inextricably related to each other within the religious tradition. What is of interest for the ensuing discussions of social conflict, crime and justice, ethical behaviour and public ethics is both how people themselves explain and justify their actions and their assessments of other people's behaviour, within and outside their own social group.

7.2 ATR, social conflict, crime and concepts of justice

Conflicts, whether on a small or large scale, often draw on religious justifications, whether or not they are over religious differences. According to Magesa (1997, p 268-270), conflict in the African context is perceived and sanctioned vis-à-vis the preservation of life. "Whether it takes the form of a feud, a raid for cattle, the acquisition of land and other property, or repulsion of an attack - in other words, whether [it] is acquisitive or retributive - its ethical validity is established within that context". Even within societies that abhor war, such as the !kung (of the Kalahari Desert), war and blood sharing is justified in terms of the preservation of life, and is usually followed by elaborate rituals. This perception is similar to that of more warlike societies, such as the Zulu of South Africa and the pastoralists of East Africa. In much of Africa, in addition to civil conflicts (and the occasional conflict between states), much of the social conflict is between what may be termed militias or vigilante groups, which according to Ellis and Ter Haar, "whether large or small, defensive or aggressive, [all] have in common .. a spiritual component, expressed in the use of ritual and the use of medicines" (2004, p 110).

In addition to the links between conflict and religion, Gluckman (1965) argues that conflict resolution is interwoven with ATR and its associated system of ethics and morality. Magesa (1997, p 271-72) acknowledges a role for the legal system but claims that in resolving conflict, it is inseparable from moral values, as “both are founded on kinship, lineage, joking, and clan relationships. The purpose is the same: to protect and enhance life in the universe. Similarly, resolution of conflict is connected to the religious system and inseparable from it. To speak of law and reconciliation is to speak of morality and ritual at the same time.” For example, the traditional Gacaca system, which is currently being used as part of the process of post-conflict transformation and reconciliation in Rwanda, has so far seemed to be working in bringing peace, however fragile. Constraints on space and time preclude further discussion here of the influence of ATR in inciting, preventing or resolving large scale conflict – war and civil conflict – although there is clearly a need to do so. Instead, the remainder of this section will consider its role in addressing social conflict and crime.

According to Shorter (1977), the conception of justice in ATR is intricately interwoven with conceptions of society and its purpose. In much of the sub-region, “the experiences of society as a clearly bounded group strongly outweigh the experience of ego-centered networks of personal relationships”, as communities prioritise their stability, existence and continuity over the rights of the individual (Shorter, 1977, p 3). Price (1975, p 70-79) reinforces this point by his argument that an individual’s identity is carved from her or his group identity, which may be the family, clan, lineage, tribe or community. Individual rights in many communities are often subordinate to and subsumed under community rights. In essence, there is a very limited sense of individuality, as allegiance is owed to the group. Even within societies where individuals enjoy greater freedoms and rights (i.e. individual rights that are not subsumed under community rights), such as some pastoralist societies, the “individual... is extremely limited in the degree of social support he [sic] could expect to help reinforce [these rights] against other individuals” Price, 1975, p. 70-79).

In many parts of the sub-region, codified or written law did not exist prior to colonialism, which meant that any decisions pertaining to social control and collective decisions were addressed on a case-to-case basis or in the light of precedents, typically using religion as a guide. Shorter (1977, p 4) argues that the concept of justice in pre-colonial systems of governance “was devoid of vindictiveness, and there was scarcely an idea of retributive or deterrent justice. Persons caught in *flagrante delicto*, in the

act of theft, for example, or in the act of adultery, might receive immediate punishment, but past crimes were rarely followed up and there were hardly any penal institutions". Generally, although the idea of crime as an anti-social act existed, the emphasis was how to maintain social cohesion and restore and promote social relationships acceptable to the deities of the community. The priority is therefore to ensure social stability and cordial relationships among members of a group, which implies that "reconciliation and the restoration of social harmony [are] the objects of judicial proceedings, not retribution" (Shorter, 1977, p 6).

On the practice of law, Magesa (1997) argues that the conception and purpose of the practice of law in the African sense is the maintenance of relationships between individuals and their communities. "Just as in the moral order, wrongdoing from a 'legal' point of view concerns the disturbance of these relationships. A breach of law, in this sense, is more likely to constitute a tort or delict rather than a crime, if the term crime refers to the violation of a formal legislation of the state. Torts and delicts, on the other hand, are wrongs against norms and customs, and the punishment of these wrongdoers involves compensation, to be determined by those structures in society that may, in this sense, be called 'courts'" (Magesa, 1997, p 273). In fact, the most important part of the judicial process is the act of listening, by the judges, to all parties, both the litigant and the plaintiff. According to Gluckman (1965), the Barotse of Zimbabwe, for instance, have a system in which each party is allowed to narrate their story without any interruption, which, it is hoped, will ensure the peaceful and just settlement of the case.

Gibbs (1967, p 284) argues that in the African context, judgments are meant to serve both reconciliatory and therapeutic purposes. The Kpelle people of Liberia, for instance, use them to "re-educate the parties [and the community at large] through a type of social learning brought about in a specially structured interpersonal setting". Magesa (1997), however, cautions that the reconciliatory element in judgments does not imply that punishment is not meted out to the 'convicted'. On the contrary, punishment is sometimes meted out, but within the African context may take the form of a reprimand, in accordance with which the accused will issue an apology to the complainant. Gibbs (1967, p 287) contends that the Kpelle Moot court in Liberia, for instance, has one of its most important rewards in group approval "which goes to the wronged person who accepts an apology and to the person who is magnanimous enough to make one". As a sign of restored harmony, there is

usually a material offering, such as beer or food, which the court distributes among the litigants to welcome renewed cordial relations.

The effectiveness of contemporary versions of these systems in criminal justice and resolving conflicts at the individual level in modern Africa needs to be explored further.

7.3 ATR and the concept of public ethics: political authority and ethical behaviour

The concept of a distinct ‘public sector’ is of recent origin in Africa, dating only from colonisation. There is not much literature on ATR and public sector ethics. Instead, we can examine the role played by religion in the governance of African societies, both in pre-colonial and contemporary times. This review therefore looks at ATR and public ethics within a framework of the types of political organisation found in African societies, namely those based on kinship, lineage and clan, and administrative authority.

Pre-colonial African societies generally did not have political structures that were independent of the moral and religious structures, and this can be seen in those societies that retain political structures inherited from the pre-colonial period, however changed they have been by subsequent historical events. First, “In pre-colonial societies without writing, all rights and duties had to be remembered. They were often brought to mind through ritual performances and the oral transmission of myths and histories... justice was the prerogative of a ruler acting in accordance with what could be represented as tradition... transmitted largely through religious belief and action, often directed by ritual experts” (Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004, p 145-6). According to Magesa (1998, p 245), therefore, the head of the group occupies a dual political and religious position. Turner (1966, p 246) reinforces this point in his argument that “if a person occupies political and religious positions of some importance, his *political* power is reinforced at those points in the seasonal cycle or group’s developmental cycle where his *ritual* office gives him enhanced authority”. Thus, people in important positions, whether heads of household or sodalities or religious specialists, are entrusted with the moral guidance of their families, clients and the society as a whole. As representatives of the mystical powers of God, ancestors and spirits, individuals who occupy important political and religious positions are charged with an enormous responsibility for the “moral guidance of the universe through their observance and

transmission of both life and tradition (Magesa, 1997, p 245). These individuals could be women or men in different societies, but in most African societies are men.

At a higher plane are chiefs, kings and other ceremonial heads, “whose power extends beyond the family or the small community. Even though each paterfamilias does share mystically in the wider authority of his group through his religious, social, and economic functions, authority figures at social levels beyond the family are ‘political’ leaders” (Magesa, 1997, p 245). As leaders at higher social levels (the clan, lineage or ethnic group) these men represent the life force of an entire group, they are tasked with maintaining harmony and ensuring the peaceful continuity of the life force.

While types of political organisation are not the focus of this section, it is crucial to understand the moral and ethical aspects of these structures, not only because they may be their *raison d’etre*, but also because they are essential for understanding the relationships between leaders and group members. Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940, p 6-7) identify three classes of political organisation, with different types of leadership:

“Firstly, there are those very small societies... in which even the large political unit embraces a group of people all of whom are united to one another by ties of kinship, so that political relations are coterminous with kinship relations and the political structure and kinship organization are completely fused. Secondly, there are societies in which a lineage is the framework of the political system, there being a precise co-ordination between the two, so that they are consistent with each other, though each remains distinct and autonomous in its own sphere. Thirdly, there are societies in which an administrative organization is the framework of the political structures.”

An example of the first system - political organisation based on kinship, is found among the !kung⁷ people of the Kalahari Desert of Botswana and Namibia, who are grouped into 28 bands located in separate camps. According to Magesa (1997, p 249), each band constitutes a political entity exclusively based on kinship. While the !kung headman’s position is hereditary, he is a moral authority “that establishes the unity of the group symbolically (headman) and maintains order by force of persuasion and exemplary goodness (leader)”.

The second political organisation - based on lineage or clan - can be found among societies such as the Tallensi of Northern Ghana. Unlike the !kung groups, the Tallensi are organised into lineages and

clans, where power and authority are more pronounced within the political unit in the form of a social settlement. The head of the lineage - called Kpeem - is at the apex of the social structure, and has limited cohesive power. His moral authority “focuses on the unity and identity of the lineage [and] he effects political power through moral or ritual prestige, respect and honor” (Magesa, 1997, p 250).

As political organisations, both the !Kung and the Tallensi despise war and the shedding of blood, not only because of the blood relations (kinship, lineage and clan ties) bonding them together, but also because of the profound respect they give to the mystical power of the earth. According to Fortes (1940, p 260) “the earth is impersonal, but ‘alive’...Incalculable, like all mystical agencies, the source of prosperity, fertility and health as well as of drastic retribution for sin or sacrilege, witting or unwitting, it is regarded with great awe”. Thus, like many mystical powers, the Earth is profoundly respected, which implies that shedding blood through strife is considered to be a great transgression (Magesa, 1998, p 245-280).

Finally, political organisation based on administrative authority can be found, for example, in the Kingdom of Banyoro in Uganda, where “all political authority stemmed from the King. Advised by his formal and informal counselors, he appointed his territorial chiefs to office, and their authority, down to the lowest, had to be confirmed by him personally” (Beattie, 1960, p 36). According to Atmore and Stacey (1979), the Bunyoro Kingdom’s system of government had both centralised and segmentary characteristics, in that “what the king expects of the chief, the chief expects of the sub chief, and so on, down to the lowest village and house elder” (Magesa, 1997, p 253). In this system of government, the king exercises authority through rituals associated with his position. These rituals, Beattie (1960) categorises as those associated with the kingship institution itself: those relating to the acquisition of power, the transfer of power in the case of ill health or death, and the king’s delegation of authority to chiefs.

Magesa (1997, p 256) argues that, though the Bunyoro system may seem different from the Tallensi and the !kung, all political structures in Africa share one thing in common: a deep religious meaning is attached to political authority, which is “meant to serve the fullness of life of the entire community”. In return, people form bonds of obligation towards these groups – a moral basis for relationships that is often called upon in contemporary ethnic politics (Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004).

Having briefly summarised the various political structures within the African context, the conception of ethical behaviour with respect to public authority can be discussed. However, as I illustrate in the ensuing paragraphs, the issue of ethical behaviour vis-à-vis governance cannot be discussed without first addressing the concept of dignity, as the concept of dignity is embedded in African systems of behaviour and conduct.

In many African societies, dignity is defined in terms of both material wealth and a healthy life. It is judged by the absence of want, in that a person is dignified if they are healthy and has an abundance of wealth in the form of crops, animals and children. In the African context, therefore, “there is nothing wrong in displaying one’s material possessions or physical and mental prowess within acceptable limits and within the context of an individual’s social status at that moment” (Magesa 1997, p 265).

While these characteristics are acceptable criteria for dignity for the average African, the expectations of a dignified political leader include these and more. Magesa (1997, p 264), for instance, argues that “if, for example, a chief does not entertain frequently and lavishly, he breaks the code of dignity”. A stingy leader fails to promote communion [loyalty and unity] among his subjects. If he does not judge justly, he may be suspected of anger or favoritism. ...above all, he must be above corruption. Soliciting or accepting bribes is beneath him; as chief, as the representative of the people, everything in the realm of essence belongs to him. He must be beyond reproach.”

If this is the case, when does the accumulation of wealth in order to demonstrate generosity and reward loyalty become corruption? Does a chief spending the taxes of his people on lavish parties constitute corruption? Does instituting his clan, tribe or family members into “public positions” constitute corruption, when in fact these are the expectations and requirements of his leadership? It is fundamental to point out here that, while some aspects of western conceptions of public corruption/ethics - such as bribery by those in leadership positions - are generally denounced (for instance, there are laws criminalising bribery in many African countries, such as Ghana), others, such as the use of ‘public funds’ to throw lavish parties and ‘lineagism’⁸, may conflict with western understandings of corruption (see also Ellis and Ter Haar, 2004, p 158-62).

According to Mendosa (1982, p 189-90), the prime “weapons of the elders in their struggle with subordinates are public opinion and shame... When a deviant is ritually accused, he is drawn into a sequence of events that demand public confession and retribution through sacrifice to the community, both living and dead...”. This in essence means that social controls through shame and guilt are critical in ensuring that a political leader does not betray the code of dignity. In fact, Magesa (1997, p 264) argues that “social control through shame, the fear of transgressing taboos, or upholding of dignity, is also the reason behind the formation and maintenance of ... various sodalities..., blood friendships, secret societies... and joking relationships [which] play a conspicuous political role, each one at its own level, in African societies”.

Here again, it is important to point out that, if the code of dignity requires a leader not to be found wanting in terms of wealth - in material things, for instance - then it is important to consider what are considered legitimate ways of ensuring an abundance of wealth. Would it not be an option to use ‘public funds’ to ensure the accumulation and sustenance of wealth? In fact, is this not a celebrated attribute for a dignified leader within the African context? Perhaps the concept of dignity and the subsequent display of wealth could partially explain the attitudes of public officials towards the use of public funds for personal wealth accumulation, and could also explain the widely held expectation that public figures will be extravagant. While these are potential explanations for what is considered ‘corrupt behaviour’ by western standards, restrictions on time and space preclude further consideration of the extent to which western conceptions of public ethics/corruption differ from those common in the Africa sub-region in this review. The issue of the extent to which the views of Africans about what constitutes ‘corrupt/unethical behaviour’ are influenced and sanctioned by their religious and social beliefs and expectations is under-researched in the public sector reform and corruption literature and will be considered further in the RaD research programme.

7.4 ATR, wealth and poverty: concepts of property ownership

Since this literature review has not uncovered any specific publication on ATR and poverty/poverty reduction, I will present a discussion of views about property ownership within the religious tradition. The issue of ‘ownership’ in African societies is highly debated. It is generally argued that, although the detailed arrangements varied, pre-colonial systems entrusted property to leaders/rulers, who were considered to be the custodians of property held on behalf of their people (past, present and future),

though the people had rights to use the property. It is then asserted that ideas about individual ‘ownership’ of property were foreign to pre-colonial systems and were only introduced by the colonial powers, although as a result of deliberate policy and the working of the market, individual ownership has become increasingly widespread in post-colonial times. Depending on the analyst’s point of view, the individualisation and commoditisation of property is either essential for economic growth or a threat to societal wellbeing. Though this is a debate worth engaging in, it is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into for the limitations of time. What is essential here is to discuss the concepts of ownership typically associated with the religious tradition and their moral underpinnings, especially the associated rights and responsibilities, in order to explore their implications for the generation and distribution of wealth.

In the largely rural settings of various African communities, property was and still is to some extent communally owned. This system is justified in the interests of ensuring shared and sustainable use of resources and harmony within social groups and between people and the natural world. Communal property ownership is based on a principle of inclusion, though it does not completely dismiss private or personal ownership. According to Magesa (1997, p 277), “for African religion, the ethical task is to establish a balance between exclusion and inclusion with regard to acquisition and use of natural resources; in other words, to establish a balance between the rights to private ownership of property and the human meaning of resources of the universe”. In essence, boundaries are clearly demarcated, by tradition, so that families (and sometimes individuals) can accumulate private property without compromising the common good.

Magesa (1998, p 277-78) further argues that “in African religious thought, the right to personal ownership is situated within the context of joint or public access to the basic resources necessary for life. Generally, the interplay between an individual’s right to own property and his or her expectations with regard to access to communal property assures the least economic inequality in the community”. As noted above, African Traditional Religion decries disharmony, whether it stems from economic or social inequalities. This, according to Magesa (1997, p 277-78), is intended to maintain relationships, and to dismiss arrogance and envy. For instance, when “tribute, in the form of cattle, grain or labor, is paid to the chief or any other leader of the community, it is given to them in trust for the entire community. Tribute does function as a system of redistribution of the community’s resources”. The community can therefore lay claim to the tribute when there needed.

Ejizu (undated) argues that in terms of social relationships, friends and relatives are expected to share each other's property, which makes personal property communal, though people might have private use of the resources. In essence, ATR emphasises community well-being which, by extension, implies individual wellbeing. It is only when a community is healthy and strong that the welfare of members of the community is assured. In this regard, it is considered to be in the best interest of all to promote the welfare of individual group members (Ejizu, undated).

The question then is how does ATR view economic activity? Like every society, as recognised by institutional economics, Magesa (1997, p 281) argues that "... the 'economic' organization of Africa [is such that] community and not association is the underlying principle. One cannot separate the economic sphere from other spheres of life for the African". Dalton (1967, p 157) also argues that "production processes, and the disposition of goods and services - in short, production and distribution - are expressions of underlying kinship obligation, tribal affiliation, and religious morality. There is no separate economic system to be analysed independently of social organisation. Labor, land, services and produced goods are allocated, exchanged, or appropriated through transactional modes of reciprocity and redistribution". There is therefore a profound belief in a common humanity, solidarity and reciprocity, so much so that "each person has essential needs for living life. Any individual variations - physical, mental or any others - do not and are not allowed to affect this belief, even if they are recognized and appreciated by others for the way in which they contribute to the solidarity of the community. Thus, any inequalities are compensated for by such 'mutual supplementation'" (Magesa, 1997, p 282).

The implication of this for poverty reduction is that leaders, whether kings, chiefs, or clan or family heads, have a responsibility to provide food for their people, lest they are accused of moral or social failure. As famine is perceived to reduce the life of the community, it is the obligation of leaders to bring succour to their people in times of famine or adversity. It therefore becomes a social and moral responsibility of leaders and those individual members of the community who can afford it to help the needy in their communities.

In light of the conceptions of reciprocity, sharing and upholding community life in ATR, one cannot help but wonder what went wrong in Africa, where there is great need and gross inequalities. What

happened to traditional African values? Can the current poverty/economic situation in the sub-continent be attributed to greed, political disarray, westernisation of African values or brutal internecine wars? This question merits an empirical inquisition.

7.5 ATR and gender roles and relations

One cannot describe the concept of gender in ATR without drawing on four primary sources: mythology, proverbs, prayers and religious practices. These are fundamental sources of knowledge in ATR, not only to understand and explain the concept of gender, but also to appreciate and explain the religion as a whole. Myths, for instance, provide an explanation of some aspects of society that history does not fully explain. Proverbs, on the other hand, are expressions of wisdom acquired through experience, reflection, observation and general knowledge, while prayers are sources of knowledge that illustrate the spirituality of the people praying, the inner person (Mbiti, 1991b, p 67-9). Religious practices in turn illustrate the actual manifestation of religion in activities. These four sources are drawn upon to explain the way women are perceived and their status within African cosmology.

It is worth pointing out that though this section discusses gender roles and relations as revealed by myths, prayers, proverbs and religious practices, particular emphasis has been placed on women, not least because development theory is still concerned with explaining their marginalisation and development practice with improving their wellbeing.

7.5.1 *Myths on women in Africa*

There are several myths involving women in African societies. This paper, however, focuses on myths of creation, not only because women feature prominently in these myths, but also because these are myths which have been studied, and on which there is a secondary literature.

Baumann (1964, in Mbiti, 1988, p 69-82) presents myths that explain the existence of an original Mother of mankind, from whom all people originated. The Akposso of Togo for instance have a myth which explains how Owolowu (God) created a woman as his⁹ first creation on earth and sired a child (the first human being) with her. Amongst the Ibibio of Nigeria, Baumann (1964, p 180, in Mbiti, 1988, p 69-82) points to a myth which tells that humans originated from the divinity Obumo, who was the son of mother-divinity Eka-Abassi. The Tutsi of Rwanda hold a myth that God's first creations - a woman

and a man - did not have children, but after several pleas for children, God mixed clay with saliva to form a human figure. The figure was placed in a pot which was to be kept for nine months, with the woman pouring milk into the pot every day. The woman was instructed by God to bring out the figure only when its limbs had formed. This instruction was followed dutifully and after nine months, the woman pulled out a full human being. This same method was used to create other human beings, who multiplied with time (Baumann, 1964, p 204 in Mbiti, 1988, p 69-82).

It should be pointed out here that, though these myths seem to place women at the forefront of creation, they also serve to legitimise gender roles. These myths, from my perspective, seek to link human life to God through women's reproductive roles. The Tutsi pot, for instance, symbolises a mother's womb, where a baby takes shape and from which it is born after nine months. Though these myths are vital in connecting women to God in a personal way, they tend to assume a specific reproductive function for women, and can perhaps be used to throw light on the origins of gender stereotypic roles.

Mbiti (1991b, p 61) argues that in some African myths, women invented or discovered fire, and are often credited with discovering and inventing foodstuffs and their preparation. "Thus the cooking skills of the woman are attributed to her from mythological times. She is thus not only the bearer of human beings, but also their cook who provides them with nourishment" (ibid, p 61). Here again, one can discern a stereotyping of activity for women.

Mbiti (1970, p 171-177) also points out myths on death, suffering and God's separation from humans. According to him, myths abound on how God put humans to a test to which they failed, hence the punishment of death, suffering and God's separation from humans. In his 1991b publication, Mbiti (p 62) cites a few myths which actually blame women for the human tragedy of death and punishment. "Thus, for example, it was a woman who, in Ashanti myths (of Ghana), while pounding *fufu* (the national food) went on knocking against God who lived in the Sky. So God decided to go higher up. The good woman instructed her children to construct a tower by piling up mortars one on top of another. The tower almost reached him [sic], leaving a gap which could be filled with only one mortar. Since the children had used all the mortars, their mother asked them to take the bottom-most mortar and fill the gap. As they removed this mortar, the whole tower tumbled down and killed many people". Another

myth cited by Mbiti (1991b) tells how the Bambuti Pygmy of Zaire hold a myth about how God first created a man and woman, and forbade them to eat a particular fruit until the woman, encouraged by pregnancy-related cravings, persuaded her husband to pluck the fruit for them to eat. The moon, which was watching them, reported them to God, and the consequence of God's punishment for them was death.

In all this, one will note that myths blaming men for the origin of death and punishment have not been identified. The question is, are there actually no myths that blame men for the misfortunes that befell the first human beings or have the ATR authors specifically decided to omit this discussion? This question could be explored in future reviews, as time will not permit fuller engagement with such a discussion here.

7.5.2 Women in ATR: proverbs

Another potent source of information on conceptions and roles of women and men in ATR are proverbs. These reflect a people's experiences, reflections, thoughts and worldviews as derived from their religious traditions. For instance, on the value placed on women in African societies, Mbiti (1991b, p 63) argues that women are valued extremely highly. "Not only do they bear life, but they also nurse, they cherish, they give warmth, they care for life since all human life passes through their own bodies". Here again, one can discern the value of women in African societies being connected to their sexual and reproductive functions, which in itself could be a vital way of essentialising these roles, as explained in the ensuing proverbs. A Kikuyu proverb says, "wives and oxen have no friends" to illustrate the value of a wife, which is so high that she cannot be given to a friend. "A woman must not be killed". This proverb focuses on the role of women as mothers, implying that to kill a woman is to kill her children (both real and potential), and thus the whole of humanity (Barra, 1960, p 62). Even at birth, there are proverbs which link girls to their future sexual and reproductive roles. Dalforo (1984, p 214), for instance, points to a Logbara proverb "a baby-girl means beautiful cows". This means that a woman is believed to be destined for marriage, hence, the woman will bring wealth home in terms of a bride price, foodstuffs and other services.

Fundamental questions raised by these proverbs are: what happens if a woman remains unmarried? If sexual and reproductive roles are as crucial to women's peaceful existence in African societies as the

proverbs imply, what happens if a married women is unable to bear children? Mbiti (ibid, p 64) argues that “the woman who is not married has practically no role in society, as far as traditional African worldview goes”. Dalforo (op.cit, p 286) complements this argument by presenting proverbs to illustrate the expectation that all women get married to ensure the continuity of society. For instance, the Lugbara (Uganda) use the proverb “an ugly girl does not become old at home” to mean that, regardless of a girl’s ugliness or beauty, she is expected to get married, lest she will bear no children and will thus be deprived of ‘womanhood’ (ibid). For the childless woman, a Kikuyu proverb sums up her sorrow in traditional African societies: “the woman whose sons have died is richer than a barren woman” (Barra, 1960, p 61). Note that the emphasis in this proverb is on sons, not daughters, in itself speaking to the importance attached to boys in comparison with girls in many African societies. This proverb explains the fact that, while a woman may be excused for losing her ‘precious’ sons, there is hardly any excuse for a woman to be barren. Hence, “a barren wife never gives thanks” because children are the greatest gifts for which thanks are given, and if a wife is barren, she has no reason to give thanks, even if she has every other thing in life (ibid, p 61).

ATR allows for polygamy,¹⁰ the consequence of which has seen many polygamous families in African societies¹¹. In some instances, even though some Christian men officially marry one wife, they still marry other wives in the traditional way. To start with, polygamy creates asymmetrical power relations between men and women where, for instance, in order to seek the love and attention of the husband, co-wives will do anything, including revering the man, and thus enhancing his power over them. Women, particularly in polygamous families, tend to espouse jealous tendencies which are used in African proverbs as signs of female weakness. The Lugbara (Barra, op. cit.), for example, have proverbs which state that “the tongue of co-wives is bitter”, “the tongue of co-wives is pointed” or “a co-wife is the owner of jealousy.” These proverbs illustrate the inherent jealousies between co-wives, which come out as verbal abuse. Mbiti (1991b, p 66) argues that such jealousies and “domestic problems can affect the husband who has the task of pleasing each wife”, although why he considers that men who have chosen to marry multiple wives should not be expected to absorb the problems that arise is not clear. Mbiti’s comment also implies that African men are concerned to please their wives, when in fact experience and research findings show that men in polygamous marriages are less concerned for their wives than men with one partner. The attention of a man in a polygamous marriage, research has shown, tends to be devoted to the latest wife, and once a new wife is added,

the old one is relegated to a lower plane.¹² The consequence of this, from my experience growing up in a polygamous African society, is that co-wives tend to visit witch doctors, sorcerers, magicians etc for the purposes of mystical divination, so that a husband will direct his attention to them while neglecting his other wives, or to inflict misfortunes on their co-wives. As to whether the mystical divination used by co-wives on their rivals actually works is not empirically verifiable.

In the private sphere, gender roles ascribe domestic responsibilities to women, as depicted in some African proverbs. For instance, “He [sic] who has not traveled thinks that his mother is the best cook in the world” (Ibid, p 33). While Barra (op. cit., p 33) and Mibiti (1991b, p 65) argue that this proverb illustrates the centrality of women in African societies, I argue that it serves to reinforce existing gender roles that ascribe domestic (reproductive) functions to women and public (production) responsibilities to men.

Many female-related prejudices are depicted in proverbs, such as “this woman is fire”, “this woman is a deceitful and ferocious crocodile”, “do not desire a woman with beautiful breasts, if you have no money (Mbiti, 1991, p 66). This last proverb depicts beautiful women as expensive to win and to keep. Barra (op. cit.) points to a Kikuyu proverb which depicts women as incapable of keeping secrets: “Women have no secure gourds, but only leaking, upside down ones”. Masek and Sidai (1974, p 32) also point to a Maasai proverb which demonstrates the idea that women ruin men: “The prostitute can make you useless”. Note that the proverb does not blame the solicitor of the sex (the man) but rather the woman. Finally, Bannerman (1974) points to a Ghanaian proverb which articulates that “When a woman increases in wealth, they are silent. But when they fall into trouble, the whole world gets to know”. This proverb, according to Bannerman, explains the complaints of African men that women are very complex creations, whom they (African men) fail to understand.

7.5.3 Women and religious roles and practices in ATR

In ATR, though both women and men generally participate in religious activities and make contributions to the spiritual welfare of their lives, families and societies, these religious roles are often distinct, operating on different planes.

In the domestic, private sphere, religious practice may take the form of prayer. Many African societies have prayers which ordinary women say. These prayers, according to Mbiti (op. cit.), illustrate women's spirituality in ATR, and are often said to God, either through the ancestors or directly, for protection against evil, for procreation, for peace, for rain, at a girl's first menstruation, and to request for children, etc. For instance, a typical prayer among women from the Pygmies of Zaire runs: "morning has risen. God, take away from us every pain, every ill, every mishap. God, let us come safely home" (Mbiti, 1991b, p 68). This prayer, according to Mbiti (ibid, p.68-9), is a reflection of the woman (mother) bringing her family before God and handing them over to God, with the belief that God will keep them away from evil. Among the Aro women of Sierra Leone, a mother usually prays to the ancestors to convey her request for the healing of a child to God, by reciting "O spirits of the past, this little one I hold is my child; she is your child also, therefore be gracious unto her [sic]". In response to the mother's prayers, other women chant "She has come into a world of trouble: sickness is in the world, and cold and pain; the pain you knew, the sickness with which you were familiar". Immediately following the chanting of the women, the mother prays on: "Let her sleep in peace, for there is healing in sleep. Let none among you be angry with me or with my child". The other women take up their chanting: "Let her grow, let her become strong. Let her become full-grown" (ibid, p.69). Mbiti (ibid) argues that this prayer illustrates a deep connection with and sensitivity towards spiritual realities.

In contrast, in the public sphere, while priests are nearly always men in every African society, priestesses are few and confined to only certain societies¹³. Kilson (op. cit.) argues that the principal intercessor with the spirits is almost invariably a male priest while women rarely play such primary ritual roles. While a few African societies such as the Mende and the Swazi may give primary ritual responsibilities to women in communal cults, these roles are often shared with men. For instance, "among the Swazi, the queen mother shares a dual monarchy with her son and together they serve the royal ancestors and make rain magic" (ibid, 138).

Despite their subordinate roles in rituals in communal cults, women nonetheless play a vital role in personal rituals associated with status transformation, such as childbirth, puberty and death. In most instances, the principal officiants in these status transformation rituals are women. For instance, Mbiti (1991b, p 68) argues that "almost everywhere in Africa, the mediums (who are so important in traditional African practice) are nearly always women. In most cases, it is also the women who experience spirit possession". Though the role of women in traditional healing is also perceived as

significant, it is often the case that women traditional healers are confined largely to the treatment of children and other women's medical needs, while male healers are able to practise on men, children and even women in some societies.

In ATR, sexual relations in ritual are interwoven with sexual relations in secular life, as they tend to be connected to vitality, through reproductive functions. Women are perceived as the force of life, for the continuity of the community. At the same time, they are regarded as sources of danger, as expressed in certain religious rituals. Blood associated with menstruation and childbearing are regarded as polluted in many African societies, hence rituals are conducted to "separate unclean women from contact with others or to neutralize the sources of pollution. Women therefore are anomalous creatures - intimately associated with the well-being of society through their life-giving attributes and deeply threatening to life through their polluting qualities" (Ibid, p 136). One will note a paradox in the perception of women in the practice of ATR. While on the one hand, women are highly regarded for their reproductive role, on the other hand, other aspects of their sexuality are highly disdained.

In all these, one will realise that ATR ideas and practices reveal three basic social principles: the subordination of women to men, differences between females and males, and the complementarity of females and males. Kilson (op. cit. p 140) argues that:

In religious institutions as in secular ones, males are recognized as generally superior to females, though specific females [such as queen mothers] may be superior to certain males. Nevertheless, the separation of spheres of activity for males and females enables women to exercise authoritative and prestigious roles among members of their own sex as senior co-wives or senior members of women's groups based on kinship and residential principles (e.g Swazi, Yoruba, Azande...). Nevertheless the cooperation of the sexes is essential for social continuity. Fertility and vitality of humanity and its world represent important religious goals."

In a study of about 13 African societies, Kilson (1976, p 135) concluded, among other things, that though the spirits of both male and female ancestors are worshipped among domestic groups such as the Yoruba, Mende and Safwa, it was only the spirits of male ancestors which are generally revered in national cults, suggesting that "female deities like their human counterparts ordinarily have domestic rather than communal orientations". Overall, the primary association of women with the domestic sphere, fertility and social continuity reinforces their "domestic and inferior orientations in society. In and of themselves, therefore, [Kilson concludes] African traditional religious ideologies do not promote social change" (Kilson, op.cit. p 140).

8 Conclusion

This review has attempted to summarise the basic structure of belief and practices in ATR, as well as relationships between ATR and certain concepts of development such as morality, ethics and gender. While having outlined the structure of belief and practices, as well as certain concepts in development, the paper does not cover other important aspects of the religion for reasons of time and space limitations. For instance, the extent to which African political philosophies, such as Socialism, Ubuntu and African Humanism, have been informed by traditional religious beliefs has not been explored. Also, ATR's conception of the natural environment has not been discussed, not least because literature on the topic abounds and it is not a focus of the RaD research. There is a danger that, by using the term 'traditional', ATR will be seen as static. Clearly, this is not the case. Like all traditions, ATR is evolving both within itself and in relation to other world religions, such as Christianity and Islam. Moreover, there are close links between African traditional beliefs and local interpretations of Christianity or Islam and individuals often fuse elements of each in their belief systems. The latter issue is beyond the brief of this review. The author recognises the danger that an outdated, static and romanticised picture of ATR might be presented (as in some of the available sources) but has not been able to explore either the dynamics of religious beliefs and practices as fully as desired for lack of time. It is however an interesting topic for future reviews to explore.

Notes

- ¹ It should be pointed out from the outset that this paper treats African Traditional Religion(s) as a homogenous religion, for varied reasons discussed in Section 3. ATR does not fit into the Judaic conception of religion (monotheistic religions), but the discussions over whether or not ATR is a religion is beyond the scope of this paper.
- ² The earliest source drawn on dates from 1922 and many of the sources found date from the 1960s and 1970s. The reader should bear in mind that these refer to the (perceived) 'traditions' at the time. Traditions have always evolved with changing circumstances and can be expected to have continued to do so.
- ³ Refer to Section 5 for a brief explanation of the concept of witches in Africa
- ⁴ Priests are more common in African societies than priestesses, with only a few exceptions, such as the Ashanti, who have females priestesses
- ⁵ When HIV/AIDS was first observed in Ghana, it was initially called Sumsu Yarea (in Akan) which literally translates as spirit disease. It was believed to be a bad spirit which had inhered in the HIV-infected person.
- ⁶ For an analysis of rituals in anthropological discourse, see Bradley, 2007.
- ⁷ The "!" attached to the !Kung sound is the "alveolar palatal click in the !kung language" (Magesa, 1997, p 247).
- ⁸ 'Lineagism' is used in this context to denote the use of public office/position for the benefit of one's family, whether extended or nuclear.
- ⁹ Note that Baumann masculinises God amongst the Akposso. It is quite unclear from his writing whether this masculinisation of God is actually Baumann's own Christian interpretation or whether God is really masculinised among the Akposso.
- ¹⁰ Polygamy serves social functions. For instance marrying the widow of a brother in order to take responsibility for the widow's wellbeing; or marrying more than one wife for the purposes of farm labour and reproductive tasks. Polygamy could also be a product of culture, as it serves to reinforce social or political status, e.g. a rich man takes more than one wife to demonstrate his wealth or a ruler takes wives from different clans or families to cement his kingdom or external political alliances. While acknowledging these cultural undertones to polygamy, this review is more concerned with how ATR legitimises polygamy as an institution and how this informs domestic gender relations.
- ¹¹ Islam's permission of polygamy has also accounted for a number of polygamous unions in many African societies, but this review will not delve into the consequences of Islamic provision for polygamous unions.
- ¹² This is a research finding by Katumi Mahama, a PhD candidate at the School of Education, University of Birmingham. Her thesis, which examines Muslim women's education in Ghana, is yet to be completed.
- ¹³ Priests, priestesses, diviners, witch doctors, ritual elders, rain-makers, kings, medicine men and rulers are all religious officials who conduct religious matters such as sacrifices, ceremonies, formal prayers and divination. They are well respected in their communities and are usually trained to know more about religious affairs than ordinary people. Though some of these officials may be paid for their duties, they are often given presents and gifts as a sign of appreciation instead (Mbiti, 1991a, p 13).

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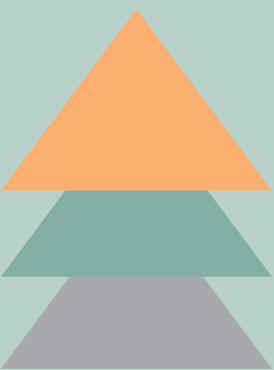
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