
THE CONCEPT OF 'SUPREME GOD' AND URHOBOTHEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the Urhobo concept of God. It addresses two key Western misconceptions about African (Urhobo) theology: (i) That the Urhobos (and other Africans in general) had no clear concept of God prior to the advent of Christianity; (ii) that the Urhobo concept of God is that of a withdrawn high God. The investigator examines data drawn from the socio-cultural beliefs and practices of the Urhobo, and concludes that the people had a clear concept of God prior to the advent of Christianity, and that the Urhobo people do not conceive of God as a withdrawn high God.

INTRODUCTION

Theology is the total knowledge of God by any group of people. Morphologically, the word is a compound of two Greek words "theos" which means "God" and "Logos" which means "word" or "reason". Thus, theology is literally speaking, "words about God" or "the study of God". Before considering the historical development of theology, it would be expedient to consider some of its definitions. According to the Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics (1972:293) theology is defined as the science which deals, according to scientific method, with the facts and phenomena of religion and culminates in a comprehensive synthesis or philosophy of religion, which seeks to set forth in a systematic way all that can be known regarding the objective grounds of religious belief. In the America Heritage Dictionary, theology is (i) defined as the study of the nature of God and religious truth; rational inquiry into religious questions, especially those posed by Christianity (ii) an organized, often formalized body of opinions concerning God and man's relationship to God. The New Encyclopedia Britannica (63) refers to theology as a discipline of religious thought that is restricted in its narrower sense, because of its origination and format, to Christianity but that may be applied in a broader sense, because of its themes, to other religions. The themes of theology are God, man, the world, salvation and eschatology. The Urhobo concept of *Oghene* antedates the advent of Christianity; it is original and indigenous to the Urhobo. J. J. Williams (in O'Connell: 1962: 67) postulates that "somewhere in the dim past, a wave, or more probably a series of waves of Hebraic influence swept over Negro Africa leaving unmistakable traces among the various tribes, where they have endured even to this present day". Coming from a European scholar such sentiments should hardly surprise us; they emanate from the same mindset as that which informed Emily Ludwig's Eurocentric and parochial postulation that "Deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing" (Smith: 1). The fact that Africans (like other people) have always had a clear concept of God is well - established by various researchers. Ezea (1979:3), for example, notes that every nation under heaven has the consciousness of one great Maker of things. That is why Mbiti (1969:29) asserts that no one shows a child the supreme being, implying

that every race has the consciousness of Deity. Another misconception about the African (in general, and Urhobo in particular) perception of God derives from Pettazzoni's 'Deus Otiosus' theory. The 'Deus Otiosus' theory proposed by Raphalele Pettazzoni (Pettazzoni,1922:365) states that 'the world once made, and the cosmos established, the creator's work is as good as done. Any more intervention on His part would not only be superfluous, but possibly dangerous, since any change in the cosmos might let it fall back into chaos. This theory, either in its original or in a modified form, has been applied by some Western scholars in describing the Supreme Being in African traditional religion to indicate the idea of his non-active involvement in the affairs of the world and hence the basis of infrequent sacrifice to Him (Brill, 1938:188). Thus, it is alleged that African worship a 'high' or 'sky' or 'withdrawn' God who does not directly intervene in the affairs of man' who, having created all things, has withdrawn to his high and remote abode in the sky, leaving man to his own devices. The Urhobo conceive *Oghene* as the 'Supreme Being who created the world and everything in it. Far from being a 'withdrawn high god'; *Oghene* is conceived as taking a direct interest in the affairs of men, hence the Urhobo worship Him directly (Ubrurhe 2003:22). The Urhobo have always had a clear concept of the *Oghene*. Nabofa (in Ilega 2000:86) has observed that the only spiritual Being originally worshipped by the Urhobo is *Oghene*.

Far from being an 'imported concept' (Metuh, 1981:37) or a cultural adaptation of "The Christian God borrowed and thinly disguised" (Westermann, 1985:74), the Urhobo concept of *Oghene* antedates the advent of Christianity; it is original and indigenous to the Urhobo. J.J. Williams (in O'Connel: 1962:67) postulates that "somewhere in the dim past, a wave, or more probably a series of waves of Hebraic influence swept over Negro Africa leaving unmistakable traces among the various tribes, where they have endured even to this present day". Coming from a European scholar such sentiments should hardly surprise us; they emanate from the same mindset as that which informed Emily Ludwig's Eurocentric and parochial postulation that "Deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing" (Smith: 1974). The fact that Africans (like other people) have always had a clear concept of God is well - established by various researchers. Ezea (1979:3), for example, notes that every nation under heaven has the consciousness of one great Maker of things. That is why Mbiti (1969:29) asserts that no one shows a child the supreme being, implying that every race has the consciousness of Deity. Nabofa (in Ilega 2000:74) in an attempt to explicate the position of *Oghene* in the Urhobo cosmology has raised three pertinent questions: what is the Urhobo concept of God? Who do they say God is? What has been their traditional theology? We shall attempt to answer these questions by looking at the etymology of the name *Oghene*, the attributive names *Osonobrugwe*, *Agbadagbruru*, *Obeotakporhurhu* and the nature of Urhobo theology.

OGHENE

In examining the etymology of *Oghene* (God) among the Urhobo, Erivwo (1991:4) postulates Bini origin when he observes that there is a street in Benin called "*Orhe Oghene*". He further observes that the Auchi people call God "*Oghena*" and the Uneme in Akoko Edo

division call him "*Oghene*". Eriwo rejects Talbot's view (in Talbot 1926:39) that *Oghene* is identified with the On! of Ife who, was called "*Oghene*", Eriwo argues that if "*Oghene*" were derived from the On! of Ife, the Urhobo would have images of him. As it is, the Urhobo do not have an image for *Oghene*. Eriwo (1991:17-22) has identified three forms of worship offered to *Oghene*: the casual and perfunctory worship, worship involving the use of *Orhen* (Kaoline) and worship at *Oghene-egodo*. Nabofa (in Ilega, 2000: 77 - 78) on the other hand, postulates that the word has two principal and complementary meanings. The first is that the name evolved from the expression *Oro ghe enire* which means "the invisible One" (literally 'the one who forbids being seen') Nabofa suggests that with time, the expression may have been contracted to *Oroghemre* and later to *Oghemre* and finally (perhaps by a process of linguistic mutation) to *Ogliene*. Thus the name "*Oghene*" emphasizes the invisibility of the Supreme Being, and must have arisen out of man's curiosity about the unseen force behind all powers and happening in life, a force which is invisible to the far seeing eyes of the clairvoyant. The invisibility of *Oghene*, perhaps, explains why the Urhobo have no image or visible representation of him.

The second etymological construction suggested by Nabofa (as well as Eriwo, 1991:5) is that the name may have arisen from the expression *Oro ghe emu* which literally means "the one who mystically shapes (fashions, manipulates, makes) things". The expression may have gradually become contracted to *Oghene mu* (He who mystically fashions things) and eventually to *Oghene*. Thus, the name emphasizes the ability of the Supreme Being to create and control (in ways unfathomable to man's limited wisdom) everything that is visible and invisible. *Oghene* not only created but still creates. He also controls creation in its entirety. Therefore, the Urhobo concept of *Oghene* as both creator and controller of all things directly challenges the erroneous assumption of some European writers that Africans worship a *Deus remotus et absconditus*-literally a "God who is remote and absent" from his creation. For the Urhobo, *Oghene* exercises a controlling and sustaining influence over creation.

We noted earlier J. J. Williams' erroneous assumption that the African concept of God has its roots in Hebraic influences. The Jewish *tetragrammaton YHWH* is considered by the Jews to be too sacred a name to be mentioned by man; hence they substitute such titles as ***Adonai, Elohim, El-shaddai*** and so on, for the Hebrew name of Deity "*YHWH*". These various names were given according to his manifestation to the people. By contrast, the Urhobo have no such compunction in calling *Oghene*, which they would have done if "*Oghene*" had Hebraic influences. And although we have no intention of attempting a comparative study here, one should perhaps also point out that no true Urhobo would call *Oghene* in a profane manner, quite unlike the Hebrews who had to be cautioned: "thou shall not take the Lord thy God in vain". (Exodus 20: 7). To sum up, "*Oghene*" for the Urhobo is the Supreme Being who is invisible, who mystically created (and still creates), who controls and sustains creation in its entirety.

OSONOBROUGHWE

Nabofa (in Ilega 79) says *Osonobroughwe* is derived from the Edo principal name of God "*Qsonobua*" According to Idowu (1962:161), *Osonobua* means "the *Osa* (Being) who holds, and who sustains the universe", If "*Osonobroughwe*" is (as observed by Nabofa) derived from "*Osonobua*" then "*Osonobroughwe*" one of the Urhobo attributive names of God, emphasizes the omnipotence of Deity. While admitting the possibility of "*Osonobroughwe*", being derived from Bini "*Osonobua*" Eriwwo (1991:11-12) suggested another etymological possibility: the word may have been a contraction of the phrase '*Ose ro br' ughwe*' (The Father who apportions blessings). He points out however that in Urhobo, the transitive verb which occurs with Ughwe ("Favour" "Blessing") is "*ghard*" ("apportion", Literally "divide") rather "*Bruphi*" (to give or bestow a blessing). Whatever the correct etymology of the word is, *Eriwwo* says what *Osonobroughwe* means for the Urhobo is "the father who blesses".

AGBADAGBRURU

This attributive name of Deity is onomatopoeic, As pointed out by Nabofa (in Ilega 2000:80), it mimics or echoes the sound of thunder; thunder is believed to be *Oghene's* voice, hence when thunder blasts and lightning streaks across the sky, it is not uncommon to hear an Urhobo say reverentially: *Emo we h'oto* which means "Your children are here below", This *Agbadagbruru* conveys the sense of "the mighty thundering" or the One who manifests his power with thunder. This also relates to *agbrara* the deity for the wrath of *Oghene*.

OBEOTAKPORHURHU

"*Obeotakporhurhu*" literally means "the leaf that is wide enough to cover the world". This attributive name is never used alone; like "*agbadagbruru*" it is invariably used as a compound element with "*Oghene*" and "*Qsonobroughwe*" For the Urhobo, *Obeotakporhurhu* conveys a sense of the all pervading presence of Deity.

URHOBOTHEOLOGY OF 'SUPREME GOD'

The 'Deus Otiosus' theory proposed by Raphalele Pettazzoni (Pettazzoni, 1922:365) states that 'the world once **made**, and the cosmos established, the creator's work is as good as done. Any more intervention on His part would not only be superfluous, but possibly dangerous, since any change in the cosmos might let it fall back into chaos. This theory, either in its original or in a modified form, has been applied by some Western scholars in describing the Supreme Being in African traditional religion to indicate the idea of his non-active involvement in the affairs of the world and hence the basis of infrequent sacrifice to Him (Brill, 1938:188). Thus, it is alleged that African worship a 'high' or 'sky' or 'withdrawn' God who does not directly intervene in the affairs of man' who, having created all things, has withdrawn to his high and remote abode in the sky, leaving man to his own devices. This concept of a 'high God' is alien to African theology in general and Urhobo theology in particular. First, the Urhobo accord '*Oghene*' direct and regular worship. Eriwwo (1991:17-22) identifies three forms of worship which the Urhobo accord *Oghene* while Nabofa (In Ekeh 2000:220-223) identifies five. Ubrurhe (2003:24-26) identifies these as perfunctory worship through spontaneous prayers, daily worship through the use of '*orhe*' (kaolin) and the full

and circumstantial worship of *Oghene*. Thus, if assumed absence of regular worship is the Pattazonian criterion for dubbing the African God a 'high' or withdrawn' God, then the theoretical concept of an African high God is founded on a wrong assumption, and the entire theory is consequently, unacceptable. Moreover, as Justin Ukpong argues (in Brill, 1938:188-189), Pattazoni failed to differentiate between Western theology and African theology with reference to the divine functions; while three functions are distinguished in traditional Western theology: creation, conservation and providence-African theology recognizes two: creation and governance. In traditional Western theology, the work of creation ends with the pronouncement of the Biblical fiat and the fashioning of man as recorded in the Book of Genesis. By contrast, in African thought, God having initiated the work of creation continues to bring new beings into existence and to keep them alive. Far from being withdrawn from human affairs, God is still actively creating even though human beings are involved in procreating. (Ukpon 1983:190). Talbot (20) and Idowu (1962:150,155) observe that African generally believe in the presence of God's creative power in all beings including trees and even stones. As Justin Ukpong (1983:189-190) notes, while early anthropologists misinterpreted this as "animism" later researchers like Placide Temple identified this creative power as a 'vital force. For the African, creation is a continuous activity of God and, through it, God makes his power and presence felt in the world. Thus, creation testifies to God's immanence. In African religious thought, God is distant yet near to man.

About the middle of the 20th century, Mircea Eliade advanced the theory that Africans generally believe that being in the sky (a symbol of passivity and transcendence), the Supreme Being needs to be substituted for by other religious forms-the active and easily accessible. For Idowu (1962:65), to picture the situation, which Eliade does, as that in which the more dynamic and lesser gods are gradually substituted for God in worship is to present a scene in which Deity and divinities are involved in a coup d' et al whereby Deity is the loser, but is somehow allowed a consolation status of being approached or addressed on rare occasions if he behaves himself and keeps away and does not seek by his all-power to disrupt the machinery of the universe which is firmly in the hands of the divinities.

The Eliadean theory is altogether defective because it fails to take into cognizance the fact that Africans generally considers the '*edjo*' (lesser divinities) as creatures of God appointed by him to administer certain affairs in the world-a situation which puts God in absolute control, and completely erodes the idea of 'substitution' and 'overthrow' implied in the Eliadean analysis. O'Connell (1962:67-69), building on the Eliadean analysis, proposed that Africans believe that because of the all-purity and all powerfulness of the high God, people generally felt uneasy about him; as a consequence, He chose to withdraw himself, although not completely as he can be approached in extreme necessity, is regarded as the author of morality, and the gods are merely expressions of his power. The objection to O'Connell's interpretation is that it is illogical: If people are uneasy about God's all-purity, it is they who would withdraw from God, not He who would withdraw from them. Beyond argument, therefore, the concept of a 'withdrawn' high God' has no foundation in African religious thought. God is one and the same everywhere. If the God of Western theology is not a

'withdrawn' high' God, neither is the African God a 'withdrawn' high' God. God is God, whether he is called 'Jehovah' 'Iiah' 'Chukwu', 'Osanubva' or 'Oghene

CONCLUSION

This research was conducted to evaluate the Western perception of (African theology in general and) Urhobo theology (in particular). The research focused on two key aspects of this western perception: the assumption that the Urhobos had no clear concept of God, and that they conceive of the supreme Deity as a withdrawn high God. Our findings, derived from an objective assessment of the data, shows that these two perceptions do not represent Urhobo theology. Not only do the people have a clear concept of God (even in the pre-Christian era), they also do not see the Supreme Deity as a withdrawn high God.

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