MAWU DOES NOT KILL: 
ON EWE KINSHIP-FOCUSED RELIGION

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Taking religion as a core element of the civilisations he sees on collision course, S. Huntington hesitated about the place of Africa as the eighth cultural bloc, because of its unclear religious content. If thereby he intimated that religion as a war-mongering agent had no role in Africa, he flew in the face of the popular theory that warfare ultimately roots in tribal kinship logic and its barbaric cults. Had the monotheists not vowed to erase this ogre of which Africa seemed a stronghold? How confusing this has become: the root of all violence being exonerated, while a seizable literature increasingly proclaims that Africa's old religion, generally speaking, was similar to monotheism!

This curious confusion urges us to consider the biased views on kinship-focused religion. Looking at the classical case of Ewe-religion, I want to argue that the contradictory theories tend to ignore what is African religion's content and may be a true asset in the search for peace. The Ewe-Fon divine name Mawu - translated as 'unsurpassable' - may serve as a clear example of how western models caused a deviation, not only of African christianity, but of anthropological research as well. Using an equally debatable etymology of that name in my title, I observe the sorry wars waged on behalf of some transcendent entities, and ponder if a mistaken idea about religion's role in kinship-dominated societies has not misguided our view. The violence wreaked on behalf of supemacis that go by the names of God, Spirit, Reason, State or Progress, surely inspire a healthy distrust of these constructs. As the various holy wars continue, we start doubting the evolutionists' claim that they actually are irrational religious remnants of some primitive culture (E. Taylor). Even more wary are we to ascribe that deplorable religious fanaticism to a tribal kinship ethos, which monotheistic religions are accused of having moulded into the faith in a Supreme Patriarch, a pater familias writ large, deemed to protect his people. No doubt, the sight of Moses holding up his arms and

1 P. Samuel Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order, New York, 1996, p. 45-48. In his article 'Clash of civilizations or clash of religions?', J. Fox notes that Huntington hesitates to include Africa in the list "precisely because it does not have an obvious religious component". In: Ethnicities, 1 (2001), 300.

2 My focus is the Anlo-Ewe, a Ghanaian subgroup of the great Ewe-Fon linguistic family stretching from the Volta in Ghana to the Nigerian border. They are culturally akin to the Yoruba family in Nigeria.

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forcing JHWH into supporting the Hebrew army against the enemy may seem to portray a remnant of humanity’s evolutionary odyssey, deemed to be dominated by religion of blood ties, blocking true democracy.³ My cursory study of the Ewe religion, a choice example of the chided polytheism, seems however to retrace valuable aspects that were unduly obscured by complex processes.⁴

Using 'kinship-focused religion’ as an the alternative for what is often called animist or primal religion, I wish to argue that its focus is a cultic domain that braces a society ruled by kinship logic and the value of life.⁵ Whereas the arrival of monotheism is presented as a moral progress on that kinship-based order, it would seem that much harm was done by a pull into a contrary sense. With respect to the Ewe religion the data for a historical study of that process are readily available. But I wish rather to study the theological value that deserves reconsidering. Its reassessment is overdue, as the African traditions reassert themselves on their continent as well as abroad, But we must first examine the (neo)colonial project that has transformed a kinship-focused religion into a centralised system.

Shaping a Supreme Being

For centuries it had seemed evident that the African religious experience was quite unlike monotheism. But when I arrived in Ewe-land (1968), a basic shift had taken place, bringing the two closer. Both locally and in western intellectual circles a complex process had taken place, among religionists as well as their agnostic detractors. These intriguing changes require a more refined study than can be offered here, and are already receiving serious attention. But the criticism of that historical process on

³ See Ex. 17:8-16. Quoting without more ado Ruth’s words 'your people shall be my people, your God, my God’ (Rt 1:16), the preacher at the Reformed Dutch Crown Prince’s marriage to an Argentinean Catholic (on 2-2-2002) seemed to follow the same line: each people with its God. That this went unnoticed in such a highly charged ecumenical setting could have two reasons, which we may consider later.

⁴ This article continues a series in which I examined the anti-kinship mood in Western Judeo-Christian thought right into its present secularist phase. Africans have often taken exception to this. One Ugandan old lady, refusing baptism, said not to fancy a heaven where there is no family dancing. See for this in Extra ecclesia nulla saltatio, also Wiel Eggen, ‘Sing: “Precious Shouts of Murderous Crowds”. Bach and Mission’s Third Act,’ in: Frans Wijzen & Peter Nissen (eds.), Mission is a Must. Intercultural Theology and the Mission of the Church, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002, 134-146 esp. 146.

⁵ The much reviled idea of force vital, stemming from vitalist philosophy and proposed by P. Tempels (in La philosophie bantoue) as a Bantu transcendental, can be acknowledged provided it figures as a moral value, rather than as a metaphysical principle. See L. Magesa in African religion, The moral traditions of abundant life, Maryknoll, 1997.