"ARISE, O GOD!" THE PROBLEM OF 'GODS' IN WEST AFRICA*

BY

PATRICK J. RYAN

(University of Ghana, Legon)

The first outside observers of the ways in which West Africans have approached reality religiously came respectively from Muslim North Africa at the end of the first millenium A.D. and from Christian Western Europe a half millennium later. As Muslims and Christians, both to a greater or lesser extent inheritors of Semitic traditions of faith insistent on the oneness of God, these outsiders brought to their descriptions of African religiousness scriptural prejudices against shirk, the ascription of partners to God (Qur'an 4:48), and "the idols of the nations" (Psalm 135:15). A more irenic understanding of the forms of West African faith in the transcendent has generally become possible only in the twentieth century, often under the prodding of anthropologists. Nowadays, such positive evaluation of traditional African religious forms is commonplace, especially among intellectuals of Christian or formerly Christian heritage. African Muslims have, however, proved notably less prone to this point of view.

But even the modern, relatively meliorative understanding of how West Africans have traditionally looked upon the transcendent betrays a tendency to impose upon West African religious experience conceptual categories inherited from the Middle East or from the Greco-Roman world. Not only outside observers but also certain African Christian insiders have perpetuated a tendency, perhaps unconscious, to describe African conceptions of the transcendent in Semitic or Indo-European theological categories that are still basically foreign. To call these intellectual categories foreign implies that they impose on the forms of traditional African piety, without adequate interval equivalencies, alien patterns of thought.
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What precisely is this foreign schematization derived from Semitic and Indo-European sources?

In the Semitic Middle East, the generic name for the personified transcendent object of human religious intentionality has usually been 'el or 'il or one of its linguistic variants, usually translated into English as ‘god’, ‘deity’, or ‘divinity’.¹ In much of the Semitic language area, the gods (Hebrew, 'elohim; Arabic, alihat) were originally conceived of as a divine assembly, although at various times in different areas, one or other god might ascend over the others.

The mythic pattern of an individual god rising to presidency over a divine assembly may have originated in Mesopotamia even earlier than the invasion of that area by the Semitic Akkadians in the late third millenium B.C. The Babylonian creation myth, Enuma elish, “in its original form describes the dangers which once beset the gods when they were threatened with attack from the powers of chaos...; how the gods assembled and chose young Enlil to be their king and champion; and how Enlil vanquished the enemy, Ti’amat, by means of the storms, those forces which express the essence of his being.”² For all his supremacy, however, Enlil (or, in a later revision, Marduk) still belongs to the genus ‘god’, as Jacobsen’s rendering of Marduk’s enthronement makes clear:

They made a princely dais for him
And he sat down, facing his fathers, as a councillor
‘“Thou art of consequence among the elder gods...
What thou has spoken shall come true, thy word shall not prove vain
Among the gods none shall encroach upon thy rights.”³

Once such a god had achieved supremacy in the divine assembly, he might retain his proper name or become more formally known as the God. Psalm 82 reflects something of this mythic pattern, entailing not only the rise of the God (ha-’Elohim) to presidency over the divine assembly but also the demotion of the other gods into insignificance.

Dahood describes the beginning of Psalm 82 as a “heavenly tribunal where God passes judgment” on other gods: “God presides in the divine council, in the midst of the gods adjudicates” (Psalm 82:1).⁴ Dahood interprets the concluding section of the psalm as the author’s realization that the gods “are nothing,