MONOTHEISM AND PANTHEISM IN AFRICA

BY

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

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

Twenty years later J. B. Danquah, in The Akan Doctrine of God, criticized Rattray for missing “the whole sunshine” of Ashanti religion, objected to the term “sky God”, and declared that “altars and shrines to ancestral and divine gods are unknown things to the Akan” [2]. Danquah expounded a philosophy which selected three names of the Ashanti Supreme Being, to indicate in turn the basic idea of Deity, a personal religious God, and an infinite Being. The unity in diversity of God was affirmed, and most worship of the personal God was said to be offered through the intermediary of the ancestors. In fact God himself was called “the Great Ancestor”, a conception.
claimed to be original to the African. The ancestral spirit is a creative
energy, an "over-soul", which does not die but is honoured and deified
in the dignity of the Great Ancestor, himself the father of all, and of
one blood with men who come from his blood and breath. This gives
a unity of God, ancestors and men, in which the continuing blood of
the community is the greatest factor of existence.

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

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