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Reading Summary

Anthropologists and missionaries have been carrying out studies of African traditions and religion for almost a century. Scholars have come up with various issues regarding misconceptions and different perceptions that most Westerners have regarding African religion. In the West, the notion 'African' serves to express racial discrimination resulting from the ancient slave trade along Saharan Africa. They hold a perception of uniformity in African culture and, therefore, ignore a separate ethnic and linguistic identity of African societies. Traditions form an identity of a particular African group through common thread of experiences and values like rituals, offerings, and historical sources. When referring to religion, Western religion experts associate African religion with animism, which is a portrayal of a hurtful, insulting, and inadequate attitude towards African activities. As a result, African religion has always been taken to be primitive in nature in comparison with Christianity and Islam. Such scholars as Taylor conclude that African religion is polytheistic and associate the idea of polytheism with some negative connotations. In spite of this comments, traditional African religion is inseparable from African daily life.

Prejudices against African traditions and religions reduced in the 1950s when anthropologists and African theologians went to learn about the inferiority of African religions. They exposed the arrogance of the West recording that Africans had believed in one God even before the missionaries' arrival in Africa. Arguing on this, scholars and theologians supported the idea that the missionaries did not bring God to Africa; instead, God sent them. While discussing the gospel, they used the names that Africans referred to their God but added the definition to be the Father of Jesus Christ our Lord. Scholars boosted the life and integrity of African religion, which the missionaries tried to lower.

Africa is a continent with different countries and groups of people; hence, it is hard to make a general conclusion about African traditional religion. On the other hand, they have some uniformity in their values and experiences that prove their communal beliefs, even though the names of gods and religions may differ. They consider hierarchical supremacy of beliefs. They believe in a sovereign being called God who is mostly referred to by different local names. Africans believe that God is the creator of universe and omnipotent sole giver and taker of life who exists in the form of spirit. After the supremacy of God, deities represent the second level in the hierarchy. Africans treat deities with respect in the same manner that Jews and Christians respect angels in the cosmology of their religions. In the spiritual hierarchy, ancestral spirits represent the lowest level, but people must also treat them with fear and respect. Africans believe that they get closer to God after death, and this is why they value their ancestors. Africans believe in eternal life after death; hence, people do not depart completely from a community or family. People who die part from the living as a transition stage into ancestry. Ancestors act as mediators between their earth families and the divinity.

In the cosmological African world, apart from the ancestry spirits, there are other spirits or powers that have an ability to either help or destroy someone. They include magic, sorcery,

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witchcraft, among others. In most cases, human beings who have a strong will to destroy other people hold these spirits. African religions also worship suns, rocks, and trees. They represent a special part of creation, and thus, human relate with them in a sacred kind of a bond, contrary to what some Western critics suppose. So, most of Western beliefs about African traditions and religion are false. Westerners believe that Africans are polytheistic, though this exists only due to different names of God and religions.