

Venance Tovagonze
Iringa, Tanzania

GOD-CONCEPT: "SUPREME BEING" IN AFRICAN TRIBAL RELIGIONS

Introduction

Many European writers, who made a general survey on African tribal beliefs in the past, have described African Religions in their own ways. Many have maintained that God has no place in African tribal Religions, or that belief in God is due to the influence of hierarchical society. Some have said that God in African tribals is nothing more than a glorified Ancestor, or that belief in God is the reflection of the worship of nature, that Africans are Animists, that magic is the mother of African Religions. Others have said that God is believed in, yet, is thought of as so great that no regular worship is offered to Him.

These are some of the rash conclusions drawn by those European writers: Anthropologists, Explorers, Civil Servants, Missionaries and so forth. All of them have made too many generalisations. According to the recent writings of African Traditional Beliefs, it is now clear that, those writers, did not really and truly penetrate and understand African Cultures. If they did, they could not have written such wrongly informed African tribal beliefs.

Therefore, from the authentic African point of view, all assertions mentioned above, are simply not true, since, such affirmations are made by people, who have hardly taken pains to study African Religions free from prejudices. Those writers have written wrongly and taught erroneously about African Beliefs. "To accept their affirmations is simply to misinterpret the known facts, or misrepresent African Traditional Beliefs, or misunderstand African Concept of God, etc."¹

It is wrong to say that, African peoples worship nature. As far as it is known Africans do not worship nature or think that trees, hills,

1. *African Ecclesial Review* (AFER), 1980, No. 5, p. 294.

pools, rivers, rocks, etc. have souls. Instead, Africans admire and see God's power active in nature. For instance, if a typical African man sees a singularly beautiful spot, tree, rock, river, hill etc. he wonders: Why is this spot, tree, rock etc. so conspicuously beautiful? Is not this spot, tree, rock, etc. the dwelling place of God? However, it should be understood clearly that in African Religions God is present or indwelling in His creation, but He is not part of creation. He is distinct from all His creation. After all, it is God who gives life to nature. It is God who creates, animates, and sustains nature. In other words, God is immanent in all His wonderful creations. Moreover, in African Religions, nature is not dead, it is alive. Nature is vibrating with life. Nature has got a certain force animating it. All this has been badly and superficially studied and wrongly interpreted as Animism by those European writers.

Similarly, it is wrong to say that, magic is the mother of African Religions. Neither magic nor Ancestralism is the mother of African Religions. Magic might have contaminated African Religions, but not the "Mother" concept. The "Mother" concept is an "inborn instinct" and is in every normal man, it is part of man's awareness of his dependence upon the *Transcendent Being* whom we call God. Every man remains restless until he begins to worship. St. Augustine says, "My soul remains restless until it finds rest in Thee" (God).² The African people are aware of it and by nature are vigorously religious. The whole attitude of an African man, his acts, his behaviour, his obligations etc. are religious. Generally, in African Culture religion is inseparable from person's daily acts in life. An African man can worship God at any time and place during the day. He believes that God is Omnipresent and Omniscient.

Moreover, in African Religions, the Ancestral Spirits have made the person aware of the role of the Supreme Being (God). The ancestral Spirits come back to the living: and when they come back, they never pretend that they are gods. Instead, "they make known whatever they have learned of God and are allowed to reveal to the living. They make it clear that it is God who sent them and it is God "who controls all things, gives all people children, rain, peace, etc."³

2. Cf. St. Augustine, *The City of God* (N.Y. 1950).

3. *AFER.*, 1980, No. 5, p. 295.

To sum up these preliminary remarks, the African theologians state as follows :

We believe that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Creator of Heaven and Earth, Lord of History, has been dealing with Mankind at all times and in all parts of the World. It is with this conviction that we study the rich heritage of our African peoples, and we have evidence that they know of Him and worship Him.

We recognise the radical quality of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, and yet, it is because of this revelation we can discern what is truly of God in our pre-Christian heritage; this knowledge of God is not totally discontinuous with our people's previous traditional knowledge of Him.⁴

1. Belief in God

God is known and worshipped all over Africa. People acknowledge Him as Father, Creator, Eternal, completely Beneficent, ethically Holy, and creatively Omnipotent.

John S. Mbiti, in his book *African Religions and Philosophy* says, "All over Africa people have a notion of God as the Supreme Being the origin and sustenance of all things." Truly, African peoples strongly believe in the supreme Being (God). They consider Him "older" than the *zamani* period (long past). He is outside and beyond His creation. On the other hand, He is personally involved in His creation, so that it is not outside of Him or His reach. He is thus simultaneously Transcendent and Immanent.⁵

African knowledge of God is expressed in proverbs, short statements, songs, prayers, names, myths, stories and religious ceremonies. All these are easy to remember and pass on to other people. There are no sacred writings in Traditional Societies. But God is no stranger to the African peoples. This is summarised in an Ashanti⁶ proverb that, "No one shows a child the supreme Being. This means that everybody knows God's existence almost by instinct and even children know Him."⁷

4. Cf. *The Consultation of African Theologians*, S.H. Amisshah, (ed.) (Ibadan, Nigeria : 1965).

5. J.S. Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy* (London : 1969), p. 29.

6. *Ashanti* is a tribe of Ghana (West Africa).

7. J.S. Mbiti, *op.cit.*, p. 29.

Generally, African concepts of God are strongly coloured and influenced by the historical, geographical, social and cultural background or environment of each people. This explains the similarities and differences which we find when we consider the beliefs about God from all over African Continent.

2. The Eternal Nature of God

All over Africa we find considerable examples of how African peoples conceive of the Eternal Nature of God. A number of societies consider Him to be: *Omniscient* (Knowing all things), *Omnipresent* (being everywhere), and *Omnipotent* (being almighty or all-powerful). These are essential aspects of his Being. They are part of his unique nature and no other being can be described in the same terms. Also African peoples consider God to be Transcendent and Immanent. When African peoples consider God to be Omniscient, they are at the same time confer upon Him the highest possible position of honour and respect. For wisdom commands great respect in African societies. In so doing, people admit that man's wisdom, however great, is limited, incomplete, and acquired. On the other hand, God's Omniscience is absolute, unlimited and intrinsically part of His eternal nature and being.

The metaphor of seeing and hearing explains the concepts of God as omniscient in a concrete way. We find examples of this all over Africa. For instance, the *Zulu*⁸ and *Banyarwanda*⁹ call God as "Watcher of everything." The *Ila*¹⁰ say that His "ears are long." Others visualize Him as the "great Eye" or the "sun" which beams its light everywhere. In all these expressions, African peoples regard Him as the omniscient from whom nothing is hidden since nothing can escape His vision, hearing and knowledge. God knows everything, observes everything and hears everything without limitation and without exception. This is why African peoples call Him as "the Wise one" or "only God is Wise." They believe that God is "the Discerner of hearts" who sees both the inside and outside of man.¹¹

When the *Ila* people say that God has "nowhere" or "nowhen", that he comes to "an end", they are, in fact, speaking about His

8. *Zulu*, is a tribe of South Africa.

9. *Banyarwanda*, is a tribe of Rwanda (East Africa).

10. *Ila*, is a tribe of Zambia (Central Africa).

11. E.B. Idowu, *Olodumare : God in Yoruba Belief* (London : 1962), p. 109.

nature of omnipresence. The *Bamum*^{12a} express the same concept in their name for God (Njinyi or Nnuni), which means, "He who is everywhere." This idea comes out from other peoples who say that God is met everywhere (eg. *Barundi*^{12b} and *Kono*¹³), that the presence of God protects people (eg. *Akamba*¹⁴), that wrong-doers cannot escape the judgment of God (e.g. *Yoruba*¹⁵ and *Kono*); or that God is like the wind or air (e.g. *Shilluk*¹⁶, *Langi*¹⁷).

That God is almighty is a concept easier to grasp than the attributes discussed above. Consequently we find many concrete examples from all over Africa, in which people speak of God as *Omnipotent*. Among many peoples, like the *Yoruba*, *Ngombe*¹⁸, *Akan*¹⁹ and *Ashanti*, one of the names for God describes Him as "the all powerful" or "the Almighty." His power is seen in practical terms. For instance, the *Zulu* conceive of God's power in political terms, which for such a powerful nation is full of meaning. They describe Him as "He who bends down even majesties," "He who roars so that all nations be struck with terror."²⁰

Among many peoples, God's omnipotence is seen in His exercise of power over nature. For example, in two proverbs the *Banyarwanda* say that "the plant protected by God is never hurt by the wind"; and that "God has very long arms." The *kiga*²¹ refer to God as "the one who makes the sun set," and when the *Gikuyu*²² make sacrifices and prayers for rain, they address God as the one who makes mountains quake and rivers overflow. The wind, the sun and the rain are beyond human power but not beyond God's power, who works through them and other natural phenomena or objects.

12a. *Bamum* is a tribe of Burundi (East Africa).

12b. *Barundi* is a tribe of Burundi (East Africa).

13. *Kono* is a tribe of Sierra Leone (West Africa).

14. *Akamba* is a tribe of Kenya (East Africa).

15. *Yoruba* is a tribe of Nigeria (West Africa).

16. *Shilluk* is a tribe of Sudan (East Africa).

17. *Langi* is a tribe of Uganda (East Africa).

18. *Ngombe* is a tribe of Zaire (Central Africa).

19. *Akan* is a tribe of Ghana (West Africa).

20. E.W. Smith (ed), *African Ideas of God* (London: 1961), p. 109.

21. *Kiga* is a tribe of Uganda (East Africa).

22. *Gikuyu* is a tribe of Kenya (East Africa).

According to the African concept the attribute of God's transcendence must be balanced with that of His immanence, since these two are paradoxically complementary. This means that He is so "far" (transcendental) that man cannot reach Him, yet, He is so "near" (immanent) that He comes close to man. In this way, God is thought of as dwelling far away in the sky, or "above" beyond the reach of men. Practically all African peoples associate God with the sky. Some have myths telling of how men came from the sky or of how God separated from men and withdrew Himself into the sky, whence nobody could directly reach Him.

The concept of God's transcendence is summarized well in a *Bacongo*²³ saying: "He is made by no other; no one beyond Him is."²⁴ There cannot be and there is no 'beyond' God: He is the most abundant reality of being, lacking no completeness. He transcends all boundaries; He is omnipotent everywhere and at all times.

Yet, in spite of all this transcendence of God, He is immanent so that men can and do in fact establish contact with Him. It is, however, in the many acts of worship that men acknowledge God to be near and approachable. Such acts include sacrifices, offerings, prayers and invocations.

For most of their life, African peoples place God in the transcendental plane, making it seem as if He is remote from their daily affairs. But they know that He is immanent, being manifested in natural objects and phenomena and they can turn to Him in acts of worship, at any place and time.

Concerning the origin of God, a number of African peoples think of Him as self-existent and pre-eminent. From the *Zulu* we get a clear expression of this concept. They say that God is "He who is of Himself" or "He who came of Himself into being." The *Bambutu*²⁵ think that God, was the first, who had always been in existence, and would never die. The *Gikuyu* believe that God has:

No father no mother no wife no children,
He is all alone,

23. *Bacongo* is a tribe of Angola (Central Africa).

24. G.C. Claridge, *Wild bush Tribes of Tropical Africa* (London: 1922), p. 269.

25. *Bambutu* is a tribe of Zaire (Central Africa).

He is neither a child nor an old man,
He is the same today as He was yesterday.

They go on to point out that He does not eat and He has no messengers.²⁶ In almost identical words, the *Herero*²⁷ say that God has no Father and is not a man. These statements indicate that God is self-sufficient, self-supporting and self-containing, just as He is self-originating. In human terms, it is clearly emphasized that God is uncreated without parents, without family, without any of the things that compose or sustain human life. He is truly self-dependent, absolutely unchangeable and unchanging.

From this it follows that God is pre-eminently great and supreme. Many societies like the *Akan*, *Baluba*²⁸, *Ngoni*²⁹, *Tonga*³⁰, and others, speak of Him as "the Great one", or "Great God", or "the Great King", or "the surpassingly Great Spirit." The main *Zulu* name for God, *Unkulunkulu*, carried with it the sense of "the Great-Great-One", and the same name is used by *Ndebele* tribe^{31a} for whom it means "the Greatest of the Great."^{31b}

It is commonly believed that God is *spirit*, even if in thinking or talking about Him African peoples may often use anthropomorphic images. As far as it is known, there are no images or physical representations of God by African peoples: this being one clear indication that they consider Him to be a *Spiritual Being*. The fact that He is invisible also leads many to visualize Him as spiritual rather than physical. To grasp this aspect of God, some societies like the *Ga*,³² *Langi*, and *Shilluk* compare Him with the "wind" or "air". One of the most explicit descriptions of God as Spirit occurs in a traditional *Pygmy*³³ hymn which says:

In the beginning was God,
Today is God,
Tomorrow will be God.

26. W.S.K. Routledge, *The Akikuyu of British East Africa* (London: 1910), p. 225f.

27. *Herero* is a tribe of Namibia (South West Africa).

28. *Baluba* is a tribe of Zaire (Central Africa).

29. *Ngoni* is a tribe of Malawi (Central Africa).

30. *Tonga* is a tribe of Zambia (Central Africa).

31a. *Ndebele* is a tribe of Zimbabwe (Central Africa).

31b. E.W. Smith (ed.), *African ideas of God* (London: 1961), p. 103.

32. *Ga* is a tribe of Ghana (West Africa).

33. *Pygmy* is a tribe of Zaire (Central Africa).

Who can make an image of God,
He has no body.
He is as a word which comes out of your mouth,
That word: It is no more,
It is past, and still it lives;
So is God.³⁴

It is particularly as spirit that God is incomprehensible. So the *Ashanti*, rightly refer to Him as "the fathomless spirit" since no human mind can measure Him, no intellect can comprehend or grasp Him. To the *Bacongo*, He is "the Marvel of Marvels", and anything which seems beyond their understanding is attributed to Him as "a thing of God". In short, this is all about the Eternal nature of God. We shall now see the four main comprehensive attributes of God below.

3. The Four Main Comprehensive Attributes of God :

a) *God is Real*

Professor Idowu in his book *African Traditional Religion* says that God is "real" to Africans and that is why Africans call Him by names which are descriptive both of His nature and of His attributes and all over Africa, each people has a local name for God. Invariably there are other names besides the principal name. The principal name may be the generic name for deity in general; in which case, there is a qualifying suffix or qualifying word to distinguish between the supreme deity and divinities, and then the generic name plus the suffix or qualifying word belong uniquely to God. There are cases where, emphatically, the name for the supreme Deity is uniquely His, and no part of it is shared by any other being. It should be pointed out that where the divinities share the basic generic name with Deity, it only serves to emphasize the fact that the divinities derive their being and nature from Him.³⁵

God's proper names are a further evidence of how He is real to Africans. In West Africa, God is known as: *Olodumare* (owner of the sky) *Chukwu* (source of being) *Nyame* (Creator, or Supreme being) etc. The name *Nyame* (Nyame, Nyam, Nyonmo) is reported to be found widely all over West African countries. In Central Africa, God is known

34. T.C. Young, *African Ways and Wisdom* (London: 1937), p. 146.

35. E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion* (London: 1973), p. 148f.

as: *Nyambe* (Supreme being), *Nzambi* (Creator), *Kalunga* (Source of being). The name *Nzambi* is commonly used all over Central African countries. In South Africa, God is known as: *Unkulunkulu* (The Great-Great One), *Molimo* (Creator), *Mwari* (Supreme being). In East Africa, God is known as *Ngai* (Great King), *Iruva* (Supreme God), *Mungu* or *Mulungu* (God). The name "Mungu" is a *Swahili*³⁶ name for God commonly used in East African countries.

Besides the names, Africa is very rich in attributes of God as we have seen above. This shows unmistakably that, to them God is the living one who is the ever-present, ever-active and ever-acting reality, in the World. Thus, the *Nuer* know God as "Spirit of the sky," or "Spirit" who is in the "sky." To them God is so "real" that He is thought of in terms of "a living person," never in the sense that He has a human form, but because He "sees and hears" all that happens. They address Him as "Father" in the sense of "Our Father who art in heaven", and as "friend" implying intimate friendship. He is thus known as "God who walks with you;" that is, who is present with you. He is the friend of men who helps them in their trouble.

Furthermore, the *Nuer* habit of making short supplications to God outside formal and ritual occasions also suggest an awareness of a protective presence of God. For instance, one can hear the *Nuer* people saying.... "God is present".... The phrase does not mean, "There is a God"; this would be for *Nuer* a pointless remark. To them God's existence is taken for granted by everybody For instance, the phrase "Kwoth a thin" means God is present in the sense of being in a place or enterprise. When *Nuer* use this phrase they are actually saying that they do not know what to do, but God is here with them and will help them. He is with them because He is spirit: And being like "wind" or "air" is everywhere: And being everywhere, is here and now.³⁷

One question which has raised a controversy about God in African belief is the question of direct approach to Him or of His worship. Certain investigators, as we have seen above, have rushed to the

36. "Swahili" or "Kiswahili" is the principal language in East African Countries.

37. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (Oxford: University Press, 1956), pp. 7ff.

conclusion that God in African belief is not approached or worshipped directly, often because they are generalizing from one particular piece of evidence which they do not altogether understand or because they are being deliberately blind to truth. For example Diedrich Westermann, in his book *Africa and Christianity*, said that in Africa, "God does not live in practical religion."³⁸ Against this we may get the evidence collected by other investigators. For instance R.S. Rottray, in his book, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, discovered that "Onyame is worshipped by *Akan*, with shrines and priests dedicated to Him."³⁹ Another writer, Godfrey Lienhardt in his book, *Divinity and Experience*, found that "Nhiatic" is addressed and referred to as "Creator" and "my father," and prayers are offered to Him.

Further still, the *Lugbara tribe*⁴⁰, recognize God as active in the world, and in human affairs, God is distinguished very clearly from the ancestors. As far as sacrifice and offerings are concerned offerings is made to God to remove malignant disease and drought⁴¹, and the *Gogo*⁴² believe that *Mulungu* (God) governs: The destiny of man, sending to him rain and storm, well-being and famine, health or disease, peace or war. He is the healer as we see in the following prayers: I pray *Mulungu*, my child, I pray that it may be healed: *Mulungu* now heal my body, may it be healed."⁴³

It is often stated that Africans in general neither pray to the high God nor offer sacrifices to Him; nor in fact notice Him at all, beyond recognizing His existence. Alice Warner stated strongly that "this is certainly not true in the *Baila*⁴⁴ and we have evidence to the same effect from various quarters.... The *Bapedi*, (a branch of the *Basuto*⁴⁵ living in the Transvaal), say that their high God.... is called *Huveane*, and they pray to him for rain.... Mr. Hobbley distinctly states that the *Akamba tribe*, in Kenya colony, pray to the God whom they call *Engai*, and

38. D. Westermann, *Africa and Christianity* (Oxford: University Press, 1937), pp. 65.

39. R.S. Rottray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford: University Press, 1927), p. 11.

40. *Lugbara* is a tribe of Zaire (Central Africa).

41. Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience* (Cambridge: Clarendon Press, 1960), p. 29.

42. *Gogo* is a tribe of Tanzania (East Africa).

43. J. Middleton, *Lugbara Religion* (Oxford: University Press, 1960), p. 258.

44. *Baila* is a tribe of Zambia (Central Africa).

45. *Basuto* is a tribe of Lesotho (South Africa).

Gutman speaks of sacrifices offered to God by the *Wachaga*⁴⁶ which are clearly distinguished from offerings made to the ancestral spirits. Furthermore the *Ngonde* (Konde) people⁴⁷ pray to *Kyala* (God) and other instances may be cited.⁴⁸

Raimo Harjula says that the *Meru*⁴⁹ regard *Iruva* (God) as the Protector. For instance the blessing (Go) "may *Iruva* go before you", signifies protection from every form of journeying adversity, as also does, "Let us be put well asleep by *Iruva*", i.e. let us sleep well in *Iruva*'s protection"... In their morning-prayer, the *Meru* thank God for the peaceful rest of the night.⁵⁰

In fact, we can say so many things on the points already misunderstood. Even the erroneous assertion that Deity in African religion is approached only in times of distress and as a last resort when other helps have failed, only proves rather than disproves the fact that, to Africans, He is there to be approached even at such times, and that can only mean that He is "Real" to them.

b) *God is Unique*

This conception is clearly stated all over Africa. For example, both the *Yoruba* and *Edo* tribes of Nigeria express in several ways that God is incomparable. In *Edo* mythology, for instance, there is a story which states that, *Olokum* (the arch-divinity) who is the beloved son of *Osanobwa* (the supreme God) and was, therefore, vested with all the attributes and glory due to his position, once challenged his father, to a display of splendour and majesty. In accordance with African practice, he choose an open market place for the display. When the appointed day arrived, the father sent his messenger to tell *Olokum* that he was ready and that *Olokum* should meet him at once at the appointed venue. *Olokum* dressed himself in what he considered to be an excellent regalia and came out of his room. Imagine his chagrin when he saw that the father's messenger was dressed identically as he, "This will not do", he thought. He therefore went back to the room

46. *Wachaga* is a tribe of Tanzania (East Africa).

47. *Ngonde* is a tribe of Tanzania (East Africa).

48. Warner, *Myths and Legends of the Bantu* (London: 1933), p. 41f.

49. *Meru* is a tribe of Kenya (East Africa).

50. R. Harjula, *God and the Sun in Meru Thought* (Helsinki: 1969), p. 28.

and changed his regalia. When he came out again, he found that the messenger of the father was identically dressed as he. In the end, he had to give up the attempt, admitting that it was impossible for him to go out and compete with his father since he could not beat even his messenger in such a display. The Father's messenger was Chameleon!

This is a way of saying that Deity is unique and incomparable. The uniqueness of Deity is one reason why there are no images of Him in Africa. In this regard the African concept of God is an emphatic "No one" or "None" to the question: "To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with Him"? (Is. 40:18).

Furthermore, the conception of God as King, the King with absolute supremacy, emphasizes his uniqueness. One of the *Yoruba* names for him has the connotation of one who wears the unique crown. According to them, He is the only Deity: he is not of the rank and file of the divinities and above all, He is not a person in the sense that human beings are.

There is a *Ruanda*⁵¹ proverb which says that: "There is none to equal *Imana*" (God).⁵² In like manner, the *Nuer* speak of themselves as *Cok* (small black ants), particularly in their hymns.... that is, they are God's ants, or in other words, what a tiny ant is to man, so man is to God; "We, all of us, have the nature of the ants in that we are very tiny in respect to God."⁵³ And the *Meru* have the saying: "No matter how great you are, *Iruva* is greater...."⁵⁴

c) *God is the Absolute Controller of the Universe*

This is the focal point at which the fact of the reality and uniqueness of God in the African concept is brought home to us. In a way, the fact of God's control of the universe embraces all that explained and implied under (a) and (b) immediately above. It also shows up the falsity of the notion of the withdrawn God as stated by those European writers whom we discussed under (1) above.

African peoples consider God as King and ruler of the universe. God is the absolute controller of the universe. Whatever power or authority

51. *Ruanda* is a tribe of Rwanda (East Africa).

52. A. Werner, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

53. Evans-Pritchard, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

54. Harjula, *op. cit.*, pp. 18, 46.

there may be, exists in consequence of Him; because it derives from, Him and because he permits it. "God is the ultimate fountain-head of all power and authority of all sanctions for orderly relations between men."⁵⁵

God is the ultimate source of all power and of the moral order. All life and activity, in both material and non-material sense, derives from Him. He created the world and everything in it, including not only human beings, animals, plants, and so on, but spirits also. In addition, He invested the whole universe with a certain non-material kind of power or influence which manifests itself in various ways and on specific occasions in human beings and animals and even in natural phenomena, such as lightning, waterfalls, and mountains. He is the ultimate source and symbol of that power and influence.

Placide Temples in his book, *Bantu Philosophy*, writes: "...God is force, possessing energy in himself; the Mover of all other forces. He knows all forces, their ordering, their dependence, their potential and their mutual interactions. He knows, therefore, the cause of every event."⁵⁶

The *Nuer* believe that "Kwoth" (God) is the Creator and Mover of all things. He is the very spirit of the universe. The universe is His. This fact occurs frequently in their thought and prayers. Thus, although "Kwoth" is in the sky, he is at the same time, on earth and this resolves for the *Nuer* paradox of his transcendence-immanence as one who is far away and at the same time actively and effectively rules the universe and governs human affairs. He is the giver, and naturally, the sustainer of life. He instituted the social order and is its guardian.

"Kwoth" is always and ever good; but he acts according to his own will and the *Nuer* accepts what-ever he does without complaint, and even sees "blessings in adversities."⁵⁷ The *Ashanti* summarise this by saying of *Onyame* that he is the "Supreme being upon whom men lean and do not fall".⁵⁸

55. J. Middleton, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

56. Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (London: 1959), pp. 33-47.

57. Evans-Pritchard, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-27.

58. R.S. Rattray, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

God is the absolute controller of all powers. Even divinities owe their being and divine authority to Him. Idowu says that in *Yoruba mythology*, there is a remarkable story which brings out clearly the relationship between Deity and divinities. He goes on to say that about one thousand seven hundred divinities conspired against *Olodumare*, and decided that he must abdicate power and authority. They went before Him and demanded that He should hand over power to them, at least, for an experimental period of sixteen years. *Olodumare* suggested to them that it might be wise for them to experiment for sixteen days in the first instance. This suggestion they joyfully accepted. *Olodumare* then told them that the world was theirs to run the way they chose for that period of sixteen days. They, immediately set about their task. But after only eight days they discovered that things had gone wrong—that the machinery of the universe was, in fact, at a standstill.

They devised every means they could think of to keep things going—but made no head-way; they adopted all the tactics they knew but failed; the heaven withheld its rains, rivers ceased to flow, rivulets became glutted with fallen leaves; yams sprouted but did not develop, the ears of corn filled but did not ripen; the juice of trees was being licked to quench thirst; *Orumila* was consulted but his oracle was dumb and appliances of divination refused to work; the daily feasting in the houses of the divinities stopped; the whole world was certainly going to perish! The divinities, thus, found themselves at their wits' end. There was nothing else they could do but to go back to *Olodumare*. And so, in shame, and with dropping heads, they went back to Him and confessed their folly, acknowledging his absolute sovereignty and supremacy over all; and pleading for mercy. The benevolent Father laughed at their foolishness and forgave them. Then He switched on again the machinery of the universe and it immediately resumed normal running. The divinities went away singing:

Be there one thousand four hundred
divinities of the home,
Be there one thousand two hundred
divinities of the market-place, Yet
there is not one divinity to compare
with *Olodumare*; *Olodumare* is the King
Unique, In our recent dispute, *Edumare*

it is who won, Yes, Edumare.⁵⁹

b) God is One, the only God of the whole Universe

This is a significant part of the African concept of God which must be well understood if one is to understand African attitude to life with regard to personal relations.

All over Africa, there are places each of which is considered to be a sacred city, a sacred grove, or a sacred spot, especially because it is believed, according to the people's cosmology, that the place is the centre of the world, the place where creation began, where the human race has its cradle, and from where the race dispersed all over the earth.

In Yoruba cosmology, for example, the *Yoruba* believe traditionally that the creation of earth began at *Ile-Ife*.⁶⁰ They say that, when the earth was ready and fully equipped, sixteen human beings, the first set to be created, were despatched under the guardianship of *Orisanla*, the archdivinity and headship of *Oreluere*, the first human head to inhabit the earth. *Olodumare* vested "*Orisanla*" with the power to create men perfect, comely, or deformed, and whatever peculiarities of shapes and looks, or whatever colours, he chooses. Hence the different types of human beings. The mythology continues to say that, "*Ile-Ife*"....is the earthly origin and foundation of all; it is also the earthly end to which all must return in order to be told what to do next "*Ile-Ife*" is the origin and centre, not only of the Yoruba World but also of the whole World of nations and peoples....⁶¹

Godfrey Lienhardt observes with reference to *Dinka* tribe of Sudan as follows: "All *Dinka* assert that Divinity is one... The implications of this affirmation are that... *Nhialic* is the same Divinity as that which different peoples know under different names... For instance the Divinity the *Nuer* call *Kwoth*, the Muslims, *Allah*; the Christians, *God*; and the Jews, *Yahweh*.⁶²

59. Idowu, *Olodumare; God in Yoruba Belief* (London : 1962), p. 54f.

60. *Ile-Ife* is a small town in Southern Nigeria (West Africa).

61. E.B. Idowu, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

62. Lienhardt, *op.cit.*, p. 56.

With regard to the Lugbara belief, John Middleton says that, God is concerned with the well-being of an entire tribe. He goes on to say that, in the beginning of the world men and God were in a direct relation, and men could move up and down from the sky. But in the course of history, (The) bridge between heaven and earth was broken and men fell down, scattering in to their present distinct groups each with its different language; before that all men spoke the same language.⁶³

One important aspect of this topic is found in the African sense of the "justice of God." Justice with particular reference to the social and the moral order. Before God, there is no favourite. He is no respecter of persons; He made each one and all are of equal value before Him.

A discovery of *divine justice* is made by Godfrey Lienhardt in relation to the concept: "If creativity and father-hood" are attributes of Divinity most commonly referred to, justice... follows them closely. Divinity is held ultimately to reveal the truth and falsehood, and in doing so, provides a sanction for justice between men.... Lies and misunderstanding, suspicious hospitalities and malice which accompany them, are mentioned to show that Divinity is especially needed to intervene in human affairs, to put them straight by making the truth appear.... Divinity is made the final judge of right and wrong.... Divinity is the guardian of truth.... The *Dinka* have no problem of the prospering sinner, for they are sure that Divinity will ultimately bring justice...⁶⁴

The concept of *Cuong* among the *Nuer* is illuminating here. The word may be translated righteousness in reference to God's dealing with man, man's relation to God and to his fellow men. Evans-Pritchard says: "What then, *Nuer* ideas on the matter amount to is.... that if a man wishes to be in the right with God, he must be in the right with men."⁶⁵ The concept implies also that, while goodness will never miss its reward in blessing, wickedness will not go unpunished.

The *Yoruba* have an identical concept in *Otito* – the plumb line by which man should take and measure his bearings in relation to God and

63. J. Middleton, *Lugbara Religion* (Oxford: University Press, 1960), p. 258.

64. Lienhardt, *op. cit.*, pp. 46ff.

65. Evans-Pritchard, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

to his fellow men and the social order in general; and as the watch-dog of which God has set in perpetual operation a retributive principle known as "the rewarder-avenger."⁶⁶

According to the Meru, *Iruva* is "God of (over) all things" and "God of (over) all men": For instance, the phrase "Iruva knows" embraces for the Meru only possible answer to the inexplicable issues of life as well as the unique omniscience which makes God the highest judge.⁶⁷

One element of God's justice that is emphasized very much and of which Africans are ever-conscious, is that of "the Wrath" of God. The conceptualization of "the Wrath" takes on concrete manifestation in the affliction connected with thunder. Usually, there are neolithic "axes" to be found in the shrines as "cult-objects" to represent the instruments of the affliction. The "axes" belong to the Diety himself; to be hurled at the children of disobedience. For example "*Nyame-akuma*" (i.e. God's axe) is generally found in the shrine of *Onyame* among the *Akan* tribe of West Africa. *Imana* (God) is often associated with thunder and lightning by the *Bantu* tribes of East and Central African states, but often the "Thunder" is treated as distinct personage.⁶⁸

The whole African concept of justice is based upon the fact that the world belongs to Diety; that the social and the moral orders are his ordinance, and that he is far above all divisions into races, ethnic groups, clan differences, or political partisanship. Further more the political invention known as "the God of Africa" in answer to what appears to be the European's raciocentric God, is alien to the traditional genuine, African concept of God. The correct African belief about God is well expressed by implication in the following dialogue:

"What is the word for God?" he asked,
 "Which one?" inquired Esther innocently,
 "The only one"; he said severely.
 "Theos", she replied, after a little pause.⁶⁹

66. E.B. Idowu, *op. cit.*, pp. 146, 161, 198.

67. Harjula, *op. cit.*, pp. 35, 40ff.

68. E.B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion* (London: 1973), p. 164f.

69. Lloyd C. Douglas, *The Big Fisherman* (London: 1959), p. 317.

4. The Moral Attributes of God

Concerning the moral attributes of God, many people consider Him to be merciful, showing kindness and taking pity over mankind. For this reason He is referred to as "the God of pity", "God is kind" or "God is merciful". The mercy or kindness of God is felt in situations of danger, difficulty, illness and anxiety. When deliverance or protection is needed God is called upon to help. Even when sorrows have struck, God may be called upon to comfort the people. The *Akamba* and *Akan*, speak of Him as "the God of comfort".

The majority of African peoples regard God as essentially good, and there are many situations in which He is credited with doing good to His people. For instance, when averting calamities supplying rain, providing fertility to people, cattle, and fields etc.

There are, however, situations when calamities, misfortunes, and sufferings come upon families or individuals, for which there is no explanation. Some societies would then consider these to be brought about by God, generally through agents like spirits or magic workers, or as punishment for contravening certain customs or traditions. Some peoples hold that God is capable of showing anger in the form of death, drought, floods, locusts, and other national calamities. All these are interpreted as the manifestations of His anger.

However, a number of African peoples consider God to have a will which governs the universe and the fortunes of mankind. Some consider God to be just, no matter what befalls them. The *Nuer*,⁷⁰ for example, believe that God is always right. They hold that, "God rewards good to those who follow good conduct, and evil to those who follow evil conduct."⁷¹

Concerning the holiness of God, little is said directly by African peoples. Some societies hold that God cannot be charged with any offence since He is above the level of "fault", "failure", "wrong" and "unrighteousness". In the eyes of the *Yoruba*, God is "the pure king" . . . who is without blemish.⁷²

70. *Nuer* is a tribe of Sudan (East Africa).

71. Evans-Pritchard, *Op. cit.*, pp. 12, 19.

72. E.B. Idowu, *Op. cit.*, p. 47.

The concept of God's holiness is also indicated from the fact that many African peoples have strict rules in performing rituals addressed to God. Sacrificial animals, for instance, have to be of one sacred colour, and priests, or officiating elders must refrain from sexual intercourse and certain food or activities before and after the ritual. These ritual formalities clearly show that people regard God as holy.

As for the love of God, there are practically no direct sayings that God loves. This is something reflected also in the daily lives of African peoples. It is rare to hear people talking about love. A person shows his love for another more through action than through words. In the same way, people experience the love of God in concrete acts and blessings. So they assume that He loves them, otherwise He would not have created them.

Moreover, people believe that manifestations of evil, such as sickness, barrenness, death, failure in undertakings and the like, come from malicious human agents, whereas manifestations of good, such as health, begetting many children, fertility, wealth, and the like, come from God. They are the tokens of His love to mankind. People experience the love of God, even though they do not speak of it as though it were detached from His activities.

To sum up, the concept of God in African Religions as presented above is only a few glimpses of it. It is, however, in the realm of God's activities that we find the greatest number of examples of what people think and say about God. Moreover, we find other expressions about God in the religious activities; namely, prayers and worship.