**AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION: A DEFINITION**

**Essay One:**

**Introduction**

This essay will define and carefully map out African Traditional Religion without any colonial influences that always undermined and condemn the belief systems of Africans with an aim to divide and rule, at the same time erasing an African character leaving a hollow man. The postcolonial approach will be characterised by respect, genuineness, consciousness and above all ubuntu the fundamental basic of Africaness that you will find in every corner of the continent (the commonality of humanity). In this era of post-Apartheid, African Traditional Religion is still practiced and there is a record increase of membership despite the suppression and condemnation from fellow Africans and the current government, and therefore clarity is needed more than before. If “it takes a village to raise a child”, it means it take each an every one of us to light a candle if darkness have befallen on the village.

**African – Traditional – Religion**

The word African means the indigenous people of the continent of Africa, those who do not have the date of arrival in the continent or whose forebears did not cross the seas and landed in Africa. In the history of the world Africans are the only people who have never colonised any nation beyond the borders of the sea. But others have never spared them any mercy; the Arabs and the Europeans slaughtered and enslave Africans. And they never ended there; they even Arabianise and Europeanize Africans by enforcing their cultural beliefs/religions which is Islam and Christianity stripping their identity.

You cannot speak of an African without talking about tradition, it’s like talking about the water without mentioning the rain; it is a known fact that Africans are deep rooted people on tradition. Traditional comes from the Latin verb “tradere” which means to hand down doctrines, customs etc. And the other definition is “a set of beliefs or customs, way of doing what has existed for a long time amongst a particular group of people” (*Oxford Dictionary*). This set of beliefs is described as the religion that emerged from those sustained cultural values of the forebears passed from generation to generations and still practiced by the present generation of FaceBook and a new world order.

To understand religion is through culture, Iwe (1979) has said that: “Religion and culture are twins, essential, inseparable and interdependent aspects of human life. Culture gives flesh and substance to religion, a as culture incarnates religion, religion redeems and save culture” (pp 58-59). This view affirms the way African music, dance, art and language have a spiritual passage, songs for and about abaphantsi (ancestors), dance for the rain, sculptures that speak to the Creator. All these are cultural practices that have a spiritual character.

Then I will define ATR taking from what is stated above by saying, it is the religion that emerged from the sustaining faith of the forebears of the present generation. Also giving a comprehensive definition about ATR is Dopamu quoted by Dr Mdende (Tears of Distress)

“African Traditional Religion comprises of the religious beliefs and practices of the African, which has been in existence from time immemorial, and are still adhered to today by many Africans. It is the indigenous religion of the Africans, which has been handed down by their forebears . . . it is a religion that originated from the peoples’ environment and on their soil. It is neither preached to them nor imported to them. Africans are not converted into it. Each person is born into it, lives it, practices it, and is proud to make it his own. Thus the word “traditional” serves the purpose of distinguishing African religion from any other religion that has been brought to the people through missionary zeal and by propaganda”. (Dopamu, 1991:22)

What makes the ATR different from other religions is that it does not have a founder. Awolalu said “it the religion without a founder, as the founders cannot be found no matter how far we go back to history”. ATR believes to the creator, God, the Supreme Being which does not have sex and race. In Christianity the intermediary is Jesus, in Islam is Muhammad and in Hindu is Hare Krishna. The belief in ancestors is an important element of the ATR (that they can be no me without my parents and those before them); and the ancestors are the closest link between the physical and the spiritual world. ATR has three basic beliefs which are: Creator, Ancestors and Ritual performances, and that is the totality of the belief of ATR which is: the can be no Ritual without the Ancestors, no Ancestors without the Creator and no Creator without us the creation/created. It is a chain if it is broken the will be no connection, the circle should be kept in its natural form like the shape of the earth that is roundness.

Every religion has its own mythological stories that carry a certain message with an aim to educate or to keep the mystical presence of the belief alive. Also ATR has many stories of creation that vary from tribe to tribe just like music and dance but the commonality is always there. ATR is able to adapt to new environment, it is not static that is why it has managed to survive the hostility of time until today. One of many challenges that are faced by ATR is a book of reference, it is not recorded like other religions (who have the Bible and Quran) it is passed from one to another orally and that gave a way for many misinterpretations. UMama Miriam Makeba said “the conqueror came to invade us and they wrote history, and you don’t expect people who came to rob us to write the truth about us. They have to do that so that they can justify their invasion”.

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