Xavier T Moyo (PUG)

Mr Z

African Religions

29 March 2019

The concept of salvation is central to every religion and adherents of the religion. Critically demonstrate the African conception of salvation.

The understanding of the concept of salvation in ATR(s) is one of a hard stark to undertake especially for one who is an ‘outsider’. The term outsider is used considering the view that one who is undertaking this task is has firm Christian background has over the past years been tough to believe that there is no any other form of salvation which can be found outside the Church “*extra ecclesiam nulla salus”* .

Salvation can be understood to mean a prayerful desire for the elevation of human well-being, a copiously increase on one success and fortunes in this present life (Gaba 389). Form its Hebrew equivalent, *shalom*, it can be taken to mean, the ‘well-being’ of body, soul and mind (Idowu, 46). Nevertheless, for one with firm Christian background to deeply understand the meaning of salvation in other religions like African Traditional Religions may pose a big challenge. As such, one has to examine through into African Traditional Religions’ understanding of what sin and salvation, in their traditional understanding means. This can be achieved through listening to the stories and experiences of the practitioners of those religions, in this case, practitioners of African Traditional Religions (Maimela 66). Maimela in expanding idowu’s Hebrew translation of the word salvation, defines salvation in its traditional usage as the ability of one to be free from earthly problems, situations which can be attributed to both spiritual and physical (sin in biblical language) problems.(65). As such, in this paper, the term salvation shall be used referring to well-being of one’s body, methods of one to relieve himself form oppressive situation and African Traditional Religions shall refer to the “indigenous beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, customs, and practices of Africans born out of the expression and deep reflection of their forebears” (Ebere 481).

African Traditional religion(s) values human life, and believe that life came from the Supreme Being. The theological origins of life is not mentioned in most of theological jargon ( Maimela 66). Traditional religion(s) perceive(s) that life is the greatest gift of God to humanity. This is shown in the rituals which are performed throughout one’s life form birth until his death. Traditional societies celebrate events in the life of the individual from the naming ceremony, circumcision and marriage, and funerals among others (Mbit 20). More so, the birth of a child is not the concern of the parents only, but the relatives and the dead benefit as well. This is supported by Gdadegesin who had this to say,

“The meaning of this is that the child as an extension of the family tree, should be given a name that reflects his/her membership thereof, and is expected that the name so given will guide and control the child by being a constant reminder to his/her membership of the family and the circumstances of his/her birth (292)

This shows that, the family has the primary duty of protection the child and be responsible for the day to day wellbeing of the child so that he can live a good life. The African understands God to be responsible for bringing new members into the community and it is the duty of the community as a whole to take care of one until his death because life in the African understanding is best lived collectively. This is supported by Maimela who argue that, “life is something communal and is possible only in a network of mutual interdependencies between an individual and his/ her community” (66). As such, in the upbringing of one, he is encouraged to make sure that he keep the relationship with his kin, relatives, and the ancestors as much as close as possible. This is not only for the welfare of the society through brotherhood in the society rather, it improves one’s understanding on the reason why he should live. The society needs him and he has the role to make himself happy.

African societies have somewhere to place their blame on in case an individual or the society faces calamities, misfortunes of life. African continent is understood to be an aggressive land where people are constantly facing danger to their lives (Swayerr 129). There are constant occurrence of droughts hence no food security, human lives is constantly threatened by wild animals (126). Under such life threatening condition, which appears to be contrary to one’s believes that, life is precious, valuable and should be lived to the fullest, traditional societies had to find a way to postulate the effects of these agencies which appear to be ant-life. They attributed all the adversities of life to the underworld powers because they believed that they are powerful than human and are the only ones which are capable of inflicting danger on them. This shows that, in trying to find somewhere to blame for life’s misfortune, African Traditional Religion(s) believes in the well-being of the society hence any problem they face has been caused by outside forces, hence it can be argued that salvation is central in African Traditional Religion(s).

More so, African Traditional Religion(s) respect the ancestors as the source of the society and individual’s happiness. The ancestors are the custodians of families and clans, even the society at large and as such they should not be angered at any angle least they get angry and punish the family. This is supported by Maimela when he says that, African societies

“are consciously aware of the evil and injustice that might be directed towards the ancestor, thereby undermining their rank. (For example) when a youngster takes an important decision without taking the ancestors’ interest into account by disposing of family fortune, or failing to care for one’s immediate elderly family members, thus provoking the anger of the founders of one’s extended family or clan. It is because of experience of such anger, curse and, therefore, withdrawals of life blessings and support by their ancestors that traditional Africans have placed the concern to venerate and promote good relationship with the ancestors on the priority list of their religious activities by engaging in a variety of cultic rites so as to keep the forebears happy and well-disposed towards their descendants” (69)

In the case one has failed to respect and or honour the ancestors with the respect they deserve for example by neglecting them, they punish the wrongdoer personally or the family as a whole if need be through the infliction of sickness or mysterious deaths in the family. (Green 9). As such, the society is joined together into one on the basis of reverence of the ancestors so as to ensure the individual’s well-being and that of the society. Thus, it can be said that, African Traditional Religion(s) essentially have the concept of salvation.

More so, an understanding of the role of ancestors in the lives of African societies also sheds light on the question in inquiry. Many African societies values much or to say they highly revere the ancestors with high esteem as highlighted above. The ancestors are in different groups which the deceased, the elderly living (Bourdillon 227). They are respected and honour in the sense that they are forebears of the clan and have seen and experienced a number of things during their lives. In the case of the deceased ones, they are now living in the spiritual world as such, they intercede for the clan to the supreme being and offer protection of the family against ‘malicious’ spirits. The same kind of respect is extend to the headmen and chiefs who are believed to be divinely elected hence they have to be honoured the time so as not to anger the spirits which installed them into power (Bourdillon 109). Besides, the chiefs themselves have power to cause harm and distress to one, as such, pleasing them is a best way to assure one is free from distress. The ancestors and the chiefs are powerful enough to case fortune and miss fortune to one at the same time, thus they are an epithet of salvation in African context. For instance, the Mbeere people of the modern day Kenya, heavily rely on the ancestors for protection against the ‘malicious’ spirits, alien ghosts and living malevolent beings with individuals of other neighbouring societies (Green 6). Adamo made the same observations when he attested that, African indigenous culture greatly developed a wonderful means of dealing with life problems of enemies, witches, sorcerers and lack of success in such a way that, they strong believe in ancestor to have total control of life’s misfortunes (47).

In addition, salvation in traditional religions may be understood form the point of view of how traditional societies understand sin. Traditional people experience sin in different ways which according to Sawyerr can be classified into four types (qtd in Maimela 68). These sins can be summarised as the sin of oppression and angsts that are caused by daily problems of life like natural disasters, hunger and even life threats posed by wild animals, the sin of constant fear of one of losing his ‘vital-power’ which gives one a link with the Supreme Being, and that the Africans are constant victims of anxieties which comes from the fear of evil spirits and malicious persons, like the witches and sorcerers, and those deliberately manipulate the important force with aim of destroying lives hence poison all human relations thus threatening the communal nature of society (qtd in Maimela 68-69). In all these areas, African societies did searches for the means in which they can avoid, or heal when one has entered into such emotionally and spiritual problematic situation (sin). The methods employed, are what according to this paper’s definition of the word salvation, form the basis of this argument that, there is no religion without the concept of salvation, and African Traditional Religion(s) being of no exception.

In a bit to avoid punishment from ancestors and save people from worries which are experienced due to life’s contingencies, traditional people have developed a raft of rites and ritual meant to immunise potential victims against witchcrafts and thieves among other life’s misfortunes (Maimela 69). For example, the Zezuru Shona people in the case that a son has ill-treated his father and ultimately angers the ancestors, two or three beasts are sacrificed in order to appease the ancestors and the father as well in case that he dies, he continues to protect the family. (Bourdillon 234)These rites shows that traditional people values life and as such it should be protected, and against all that hinders one from living life to its fullness. They all aim to bring about human salvation, relief form oppression and sin(s) (Maimela 70).

In a nutshell, from the above write-up, it can be noted that, African Traditional Religion(s) in essence have the concept of salvation. Although, the way salvation might differ from the way it is understood in other religions such as Christianity, in African Traditional Religion(s), salvation is understood and the well-being of one’s soul, body and mind, and the prosperity of the society. Forces which appears to threaten the prosperity of the society and the individual’s ‘well-being’ has to be looked for a solution to remove it

Work cited

Bourdillon, M.F.C. *The Shona Peoples*. Mambo Press, 1976

Ebere, Charles. “Beating the Masculinity Game: Evidence from African Traditional Religion.” *CrossCurrents*, vol. 61, no. 4, 2011, pp. 480–495.

Gaba, C. R. “Man’s Salvation: Its Nature and Meaning in African Traditional Religion in Fashiole-Luke” *Christian in Independent Africa.* Rex Collings, 1978

Green, Ronald M. “Religion and Morality in the African Traditional Setting.” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1983, pp. 1–23

Idowu, E B “God” in Dickson, K A and Ellingworth, In Biblical revelation and African believers, 17-29 Butterworth Press,1969

Mbit, S. John*. Introduction to African Religion*. 2rd ed. Weveland Press, Inc 2015

Sawyerr, H. "Sin and salvation: Soteriology viewed from the African situation". *Relevant Theology for Africa*. Lutheran Publishing House, 1973