

The Scientificity of African Traditional Religion and Its Redefinition of Secularism

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Abstract: In this paper the author handles the issue of secularism in African context and shows that it is wrongly defined due to the use of European inherited or mimicked standards. He explains that, while Western perception places religion out of the field of science, the naturalized epistemology of African indigenous knowledge demonstrates that religion is one of the three components of African traditional science and that contrary to Western Christianity and to Islam, African traditional religion (ATR) involves a scientific content explaining rationally the relationship between God, man and the universe, and cultural contents necessitated by the need to apply the scientific religious principles within specific milieus. Moreover, ATR thus defined leads to a scientific and normative discourse of morality. Therefore, any strategy of secularization in Africa must first make the distinction between the scientific content of ATR and its cultural ones. It is thus obvious that, as far ATR is concerned, African governments must adopt non-secular policy vis-à-vis its scientific aspects, as it is the case for any science, and apply secularism only toward its cultural contents.

Keywords: Secularism; African traditional religion; ethics; constitution; secular; cosmology; theology.

INTRODUCTION

The colonization of Africa by the West was undertaken with the unvoiced policy of the eradication of traditional cultural values and their replacement by Western ones described to Blacks as superior and more desirable [1]. One of the Western “values” later bequeathed to, or mimicked by, the new “independent” states of Africa was secularism. For Dick Seed (2015) “the term [secularism] was used in 1846 by George Jacob Holyoake to describe a philosophy of life that regulated life by empirical experience and reason and sought human improvement through service” (p. 76).

In political practice secularism led to the policy of the separation between state and Church. However, in this connotation, secularism can be traced back to the saying of Jesus: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's” (Marc 12: 17); or into French history where ‘the law of 9 December 1901 came to judicially proclaim this principle by stating that “the Republic is secular, democratic, social and indivisible”’ (Momo, 1999, p. 824). This principle has since then found its way into all subsequent constitutions of France.

But, secularism even as it was used by the colonizers in Africa involved obvious contradictions as an author remarks: “the same colonial State which proclaimed the separation of Church and state give to church the mission to form and train the citizens in terms of education” [2].

We said above that the introduction of secularism in African states was either a colonial inheritance or an act of mimicking a Western constitution. Constitutional mimicking is defined by Dargent [3] as the “reproduction of institution and mechanism appropriate to another regime” (p. 1). Ivory Cost, for instance, adopted secularism “within the continuity of the French colonial inheritance, by copying the spirit and sometimes the letter of the founding texts of the Vth Republic of 1958” [4]; while the first mention of secularism in a constitution of Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) was a mimic that occurred in 1964 in the “Constitution of Luluabourg” which stated in its article 24: “In the Republic, there is no state religion”. The secular nature of DRC has been reaffirmed in the constitution of 2006.

Secularism, as bequeathed to, or mimicked by, the new “independent” states of Africa, despite “the inability of the normativity of [this] Western theory” [5] was presupposed on:

- Western perception of religion as “beliefs and opinions” (*Microsoft Encarta Dictionary 2009*).
- Western perception of religion and science as conflicting epistemes [7].
- The wrong perception of African traditional religion (ATR) as being unscientific, “pagan and superstitious” [6].
- The supposed absolute superiority of Europeans scientific values.

In pre-colonial Africa secularism was unknown. John Mbiti [8] speaking about traditional African society explains that “religion penetrates so intimately all the domains of life that it is not easy, nor even sometimes possible, to isolate it” (p. 9). Moreover, the African’s holistic perception of the universe [9] involved the unity of the visible and the invisible which excluded secularism.

In this paper we intend to demonstrate that secularism should not be applied in African policy in the same way as in the West. For this purpose we will show that contrary to Western Christianity and to Islam, ATR involves a scientific content and the cultural ones; these later are necessitated by the need to apply the scientific religious principles of ATR in specific social milieus. Moreover, the scientific nature of ATR leads to a normative discourse of morality, a scientific ethics; this implies that being scientific ATR lends scientific bases to African ethics.

Therefore, any strategy of secularization in Africa must first make the distinction between the scientific content of ATR and the cultural ones; consequently, we will demonstrate that African governments must adopt non-secular policy vis-à-vis the scientific aspects of ATR and apply secularism only toward the various cultural contents.

Our approach for the demonstration of the scientific nature of ATR will be the “solar cosmological interpretation” (SCI), a method devised by the Institut des Sciences Animiques (ISA), an Afrocentric think-tank whose center of interest is the scientific defense of African epistemology and spirituality. The SCI involves the use of the facto-deductive scheme to state the kemetic cosmological argument (KCA) and the pre-suppositional use of the KCA as a systematic natural theology to validate or affirm the scientificity of an element of African traditional culture by establishing the correlation between its ethnography and the systematic natural theology. The SCI thus attaches to the religious content a statement of scientific verification.

However, as the trends of ATR are various, we will use in this demonstration Kôngo religion, the Bukôngo, which has been demonstrated as retaining the original characteristics of solar religion, the religion that characterized the ancient civilizations of Egypt and Sumer; thus all other trends of African religion can be shown to be the result of the devolution of solar religion, of the Bukôngo [10].

What is ATR?

At the center of the philosophy of secularism is the fact that science and technology alone should be allowed to lead public and government decisions; thus “the concept of God is superfluous in secularism” [11]. Religion is defined in *Microsoft Encarta dictionary*

2009 as “people's beliefs and opinions concerning the existence, nature, and worship of God, a god, or gods, and divine involvement in the universe and human life”. Therefore secularism sets religions aside due to its unscientific nature. Is this view of religion as mere “beliefs and opinions” valid for ATR?

Up to the “independence” of African states in the 1960’s African scholars were formatted to answer positively to this question because the only definitions of ATR that prevailed in the scientific communities were those provided by Europeans travelers, explorers, missionaries and other colonial agents of the 18th and 19th centuries [12, 13]. Their views were found later to be unsatisfactory [12] and even derogatory [14].

Recent researches provided by the ISA allow us today to sustain the scientific nature of ATR through its systematic natural theology and through the epistemology of African indigenous lore. But in order to demonstrate the scientific nature of ATR we will first provide the present state of the definition of this religion. According to Asante and Mazama [14] ATR is unique and includes the following fundamental characteristics:

- A transcendent Supreme Being.
- A creator of the universe.
- Spirits
- The belief in the intercession of the ancestors.

In a paper titled *The Elucidation of Afrocentricity in Christianity through hierarchical monotheism and its redefinition of Black theology*, the ISA, capitalizing on the notion of traditional initiatory teachings (mysteries), expanded these characteristics of ATR; thus a higher definition of this African religion, as seen through the Bukôngo, involves:

- The divine mystery which imparted sacerdotal teachings and was represented in the Kimpassi [15].
- The civil initiation in the Bukôngo was the domain of the Lemba. Janzen [16] represents this “traditional university” as including the schools of medicine, government; trade, etc. This Fukiau [17] corroborates by saying that “all those who attended Lemba became important men, well-known, they became leaders: rulers, judges, healers etc.” (p. 133).
- The martial initiation teachings were imparted by the Kinkimba. Bittremieux [6] gives the proof of this affirmation by informing us that in the initiatory hut were found “pebble guns” and “wooden rifles for tournaments” (p. 37), according to him the word Kinkimba derives from kimba meaning to be courageous, valiant of heart. (p. 25).

The natural trend of the ATR, as preserved in the Bukôngo, is characterized by the preponderance in an initiatory system of the divine mystery over the human (civil and martial because any preponderance of the

civil erodes the prerogatives of the high priest in favor of the king as found in traditional Uganda [18]; while the preponderance of the martial elements leads to a martial religion. This last case is seen in the vodun by its divinization of the snake, an African martial symbol as found in the Kinkimba [19] and in so of the Betis of Cameroun [20], and by the presence in it of the gods of war [21].

The hierarchical nature of its theism: the monotheism of the Bukôngo was attested even by its ethnography: *'Nzâmbi cannot have equal, He is not even (...) the "primus inter pares" or the term of an animist evolution, a polytheist one, or another, but the One, the Inaccessible, the Great Chief, who from his empyrean dominates everything.'* (133).

Thus the existence of other Gods in the Bukôngo shows that its monotheism is hierarchical; Nzâmbi ampûngu tulêndo thrones above lower gods: Mbumba Lowa (the creator), Mpina Nza (the god governor), Kôngo (the eponymous ancestor), etc.

The notion of the presence of the divinity in man and around man:

The Kimahungu (the Verb) as the divine completeness of being is the nature of men and Gods [17]. According to Garliet [22] the Verb was an object of cult among the non-islamic populations of Black Africa "under the name of Komo, among the Mandes, and of Do, among the Sênoufo" (p. 41).

The existence of spirits: spirits, called *bakisi* in the Bukôngo (Johannes, 2008), are the entities that animates the *n'kisi*, the spiritual power wrongly designated as fetish. The *n'kisi* can be divine, human or divine. The divine *n'kisi* is God himself as Mpûngu Tulêndo, the *n'kisi* which embraces all authority; *n'kisi* and *mpûngu* are synonymous.

The belief in the necessity of the intercession of the ancestors: this belief naturally results from the hierarchical nature of the Supreme Being evoked above which dictates that the He is transcendent. This transcendence led Wilhelm Schmidt to opine that the autochthonous of equatorial Africa have a notion of a Most-high God who was once worshipped [23]; in fact the wrong conclusion of Schmidt was impelled by his gazing Africa through the lens of western monotheism. Due to the transcendence of the Most-high, prayer in ATR were addressed, at the highest level, to the creator.

According to the ISA [10], the Bukôngo thus defined is none other than solar religion, the religion that characterized the ancient civilizations of Egypt and Sumer, and which has been preserved in Kôngo religion, the Bukôngo. Therefore, the southward migration of African ethnics, and their common participation in the very epistemology which characterized the ancient civilizations of Egypt and

Sumer [15], imply that the different trends of ATR are the devolutions of solar religion, of the Bukôngo.

Solar epistemology and the scientific nature of ATR

"Naturalized epistemology" is an expression coined by W. O. Quine in 1951. It alludes to epistemology as a science that describes "the internal structure of the sciences and their evolution" [24]; thus it presupposes the existence of a science. Therefore the descriptive study of African indigenous knowledge (AIK) presupposes the existence of a corpus of scientific texts to be analyzed; aside from Ethiopia such a body of texts could not be found south of the Sahara; this situation summarized the difficulty of stating the science of AIK.

Nevertheless, the ISA has demonstrated that the naturalized epistemology of African indigenous knowledge exists [15]. The obvious difference existing between Western worldview [9], that we call lunar, due to its focus on matter as the substance of reality, and African holistic worldview, qualified as solar due to its focus on the divine, led the ISA to demonstrate that the statement of the naturalized epistemology of AIK results from the analysis of the nature and the content of the three highest initiatory academies of the solar culture: the divine, the civil and the martial.

The ISA proved that, as a science, the AIK comprises three components: religion, wisdom and elucidative knowledge, while in lunar epistemology religion is out of the field of empirical knowledge. One of the proofs of the validity of this conclusion is that, as we will see below, the main features of ATR described above can be formulated in a scientific way by starting from an empirical fact; this task belongs to the KCA.

The KCA a scientific statement of ATR

Cosmological argument has been used since Plato's book X of his work titled *The Laws*. It starts from the "the presence of the cosmos back to a creator of the cosmos" [25]. In lunar epistemology this kind of argument is restricted to the demonstration of the existence of an ultimate cause of this temporal universe supposed to be the Most-high God.

The restriction of the cosmological argument in lunar epistemology results from a concept of reason limited to the activity of the cerebral cortex, while in solar epistemology reason is understood as "a series of direct and/or indirect revelations" [15]. "A thought came to me" will explain a Mwesikôngo, a member of Kôngo ethnic, meaning that it came to him from higher planes of existence, from the illuminated ancestors, rather than from his limited brain. Abioje [26] reveals the very same conception of the reason among the Yoruba of Nigeria:

"At a more private level, it is not uncommon to hear an African saying: "My mind told me", "Something told

me”; “I come to realize that ...”, and so on. These type of expressions indicate that revelation is an ongoing activity by which God continue to guide His people.”

The ISA has extended the KCA into a systematic natural theology demonstrating the essentials of solar religion. The KCA starts from the empirical existence of individualities and particular circumstances in our universe and evolves deductively by using the law of causality and the principle of sufficient reason; therefore this approach is called facto-deductive. The KCA can be summarized in the following manner¹:

- Our universe includes individualities and particular circumstances, it is thus an individuality; this individual nature implies a contingency.
- A necessary cause exists which includes these individualities and explains their contingency; being the cause of an individual universe, this cause is individual.
- The individual nature of this necessary cause induces the existence of other necessary causes endowed at least with a potential causation. The individual nature of each of these relative necessary causes requires an explanation.
- An absolutely necessary cause exists which includes all the relative necessary causes and explains their individualities.
- This absolutely necessary cause is the Most-high. Being without any contingency, the Supreme Being is transcendent, indivisible and absolutely infinite, all reality is in Him.
- The Supreme Being, the Father, being indivisible, each relative necessary being, each Son of God, as the manifestation of His individuality, expresses His fullness, the Verb.
- Since the Sons of God taken around any Son of God are an individuality, this relative necessary individuality manifests the Verb; thus the Verb is the fullness of the divinity in the Son and around him.
- The transcendent nature of the Father, implies the existence of a hierarchy of divinities at the top of which there is:
 - The transcendent Most-high,
 - The Demiurgic creator, a Son of God,
 - The Verb.

Since the Father includes all reality and is absolutely without any contingency, the temporal universe is only an illusory perspective of the eternal realm. However, the illusory nature is attached not to the good that appear in the perspective, but to the limitation the perspective tries to impress on that good, because its reality is God the All-in-all.

¹ The words “father”, “son” and “man” convey the gender-free meaning of the Kôngo words *se*, *mwana*, and *muntu* which can be used for persons of both sexes.

One of the characteristics of ATR has been shown to be the existence of spirits. This existence can be evidenced through the systematic natural theology of the Bukôngo, the KCA, in this manner:

- Being absolutely without contingency, the Father is indivisible; thus each Son of God, each relative necessary being, expresses the fullness of His divinity, the Verb.
- Therefore the Father, the Son and the Verb are inseparable in their substance, being and activity. This is solar trinity; due to it the Father always acts through the Sons thanks to the Verb.
- Being the sum total of reality, the Father is Spirit, the substance of all, and as the highest causative power the Father is the animating Principle of all reality. But, according to solar trinity, the Father always acts through the Sons, thus each relative necessary being animates an aspect of reality.

The direct consequence of this last conclusion is that, since any thing in the temporal realm is only a perspective of its reality in the eternal realm, each Son of God, each relative necessary being, is manifested in the temporal universe as the animating principle of an aspect of its reality, a Spirit.

As to the necessity of the intercession of the enlightened ancestors, it is sustained by the KCA through the evidenced absolutely non-contingent nature of the Supreme Being. This transcendent nature of the Most-high is affirmed of the Bukôngo by van Wing (1956) who insists that ‘Nzâmbi is unique, apart from everything else, invisible and yet living, acting in sovereignty, independent, elusive and inaccessible.’ (305) This Bittremieux [6] confirms:

‘Nzâmbi cannot have equal, He is not even (...) the “primus inter pares” or the term of an animist evolution, a polytheist one, or another, but the One, the Inaccessible, the Great Chief, who from his empyrean dominates everything.’ (133).

Therefore the KCA, as summarized here, demonstrates deductively the main features of ATR; thus this cosmological argument can be pre-supposed to be the natural systematic theology of the ATR. According to the SCI, any correlation established between this systematic natural theology and the main features of ATR necessarily extends the scientific nature of the KCA to ATR.

The KCA and the scientific nature of the ATR

Philosophers of science are not unanimous in their answer to the question of the existence of universal criteria of the scientific nature of theories [24]. However some characteristics of the KCA enable us to sustain its scientific nature.

- Its deductive nature: the KCA starts from an empirical true fact, the existence of individualities in our temporal universe, and evolves deductively

from this basis; thus the conclusion of its systematic natural theology are scientifically valid because in a deduction “it is not possible for the premises all to be true while the conclusion is false” (Ladyman 2002, 264).

- Its confirmation of the existing scientific theories: the KCA results in a cosmology where the creator moves towards the heavenly realm by being impelled by a constant power, the Verb. The acceleration of the creator implies the acceleration of the absolute space-time (the illusory frame in which the limitation of reality occurs) towards its nothingness. This last acceleration leads to a Newtonian explanation of the movements and stability of the bodies of the universe at the astronomical and subatomic levels, a holistic “theory of everything” [27].
- The mathematical confirmation of its cosmology: the conclusions of the KCA about the gravitation, translation, rotation and stability of celestial and subatomic bodies are verifiable mathematically. Compared to modern physics, the KCA offers the simplest solution, based on derivative mathematics, and a more comprehensive “theory of everything” because it allows the generalization of the physical and metaphysical forces [27], an impossible outcome in lunar cosmology.

Therefore the KCA is a scientific exposition of a systematic natural theology; the correlation established above between this systematic natural theology and the Bukôngo leads, thanks to the SCI, to our valid affirmation of the scientific nature of Kôngo religion. In this way the SCI establishes the scientific nature of the ATR.

The scientific nature of the KCA makes of ATR a religion whose authority is not Holy Scriptures, nor tradition, nor the charisma of its leaders [28], but the scientific nature of its systematic natural theology. Thus on the hermeneutical level the KCA allows us to distinguish in ATR two contents:

- The scientific content, which corresponds to the systematic theology developed through the KCA.
- Cultural contents, which are added to the KCA to enable any ethnics of south of the Sahara to apply this scientific content to its specific milieu.

Now we have seen that Western secularism eschews the leading the supernatural because in lunar perception religion is made of “beliefs and opinions”; thus only science and technology are allowed to regulate public policy in European secular states. Contrary to this lunar perception of religion, ATR comprises a scientific content; thus in accordance to the very philosophy of secularism this scientific component must be allowed to weigh in African policy making.

The KCA and the ethics of traditional Africa

Analyzing African culture, the Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye [29] affirmed his “undoubted conviction of a humanistic –a non-supernatural- origin of moral values and principles”, of its ethics.

However, capitalizing on the existence of the systematic natural theology of solar religion, of ATR, the ISA demonstrated the ethics of the African traditional culture as being scientific and normative [27]. The bases of this ethics have been demonstrated a posteriori through the KCA to include:

- The existence of the Supreme Being who is good, Truth and Love.
- The existence of a spiritual perfect realm of which every thing in the temporal realm is only a feeble manifestation.
- The highest and essential nature of man is his divinity, the Verb.
- Thus the moral purpose of man in life is to express his divine nature, the Verb.
- The double nature of the Verb revealed by the KCA impresses on man a double-responsibility:
 - Towards the divinity which abides in him,
 - Towards the divinity which is around him.

Since these bases are deduced from the KCA, they are scientific according to SCI; they imply that “the love of the I must be reflected in the love for the us” [29]. Now, this reverberates in the *ubuntu* ethics which Broodryk quoted by Dolamo (2013) explains as “a comprehensive ancient African worldview based on the values of intense humanness, caring, sharing, respect, compassion and associated values, ensuring a happy and qualitative community life in the spirit of family”. The same author establishing the link between *ubuntu* and the Egyptian *maât* adds that “The notion of *botho/ubuntu* started in Egypt as far back as 1500 BCE. He indicates that seven cardinal values in the *netchar maat* culture were: truth, justice, propriety, harmony, balance, reciprocity and order” (Dolamo, 2013: p. 2).

Thus, like the *ubuntu*, the *maât* is an ethical principle based on the scientific principles of solar religion. This Mesut [30] confirms by stating that “the *maât* is an element of African spirituality and it is unthinkable without Bantu theology”.

Moreover, the ISA has demonstrated that the ethics of the Bukôngo has both religious bases (seen in the concept of *n’lôngo*, which alludes both to law and to holiness [17] and humanistic bases (reverberated in the concept of *n’siku*, which alludes to law without a religious connotation), contrary to the affirmation of Gyekye. Thus the ethics of all other African ethnics can be explained from the scientifically based ethics of the Bukôngo thanks to the theory of the “ethical devolution” or the displacement of the ethical

explanation from the religious to the humanistic bases, displacement caused by the preponderance of the human mystery over the divine [27].

The conclusion to be drawn about the origin of African moral principles described above implies that solar scientific religion being its source, African ethics is scientific and normative. And this nature of African ethics entails direct consequences on the application of secularism in African governmental policies.

Ethics in the West is a philosophical value, i.e., it is speculative. With the advent of postmodernism, the speculative philosophical bases of Western ethics led to the ethical relativism “an idea that has had pernicious consequences” [31]. Therefore the scientific bases the KCA endows African ethics with must allow our governments to take more solid stand in defending our high moral stand; this implies that secularism should not apply to the scientific content of the ATR.

Towards a new definition of secularism in Africa

Secularism, as applied in public policy, implies the separation between the state and the Church. We have seen above that this political practice is presupposed on Western perception of religion as being merely “beliefs and opinions”; hence, thus far, the main reason for having adopted secularism in Africa is the supposition that any religion *is not a scientific value*. Moreover, to this reason must be added the misconception of ATR as being a mere superstition and the alleged absolute superior scientific nature of Western culture.

Nevertheless, the notion of the absolute superiority of Western culture in comparison to pre-colonial Africa is crumbling thanks to new researches. First of all we have seen above that ATR and its ethics are endowed with scientific bases, while their Western alternatives are essentially speculative.

Next there are Europeans Africanists, like Leo Frobenius, who recognize the high moral level that was attained by African culture as the reverberation of its scientific ethics. Théophile Obenga [32] quoted Leo Frobenius as having affirmed that: “Blacks are civilized deep into their bones marrow” (p. 290).

On the other hand the ISA has clearly evidenced that lunar science is based on the presupposition that “reality is material”; this affirmation is accepted a priori, therefore it can never be demonstrated. But, according to solar epistemology, AIK stands on the a posteriori fact that “reality is spiritual”; the validity of this base of solar science can be demonstrated facto-deductively through the KCA which clearly shows that all reality is in God [15]; thus solar science has bases that are more scientific than its lunar alternative!

If Western religions, Christianity as well as Islam, can be defined only in terms of “beliefs and opinions”, we have seen that ATR includes a scientific content whose coherence and correspondence with the fact of the universe are evidenced by the KCA and are mathematically verified; moreover through the KCA the bases of African traditional morality are demonstrated to be religious, scientific and normative while the vacillating ethical bases of Western morality are speculative. Therefore, it is anomalous to define African secularism in accordance to the Western limited perception of religion and science.

In view of the double nature of the content of ATR, the application of secularism in Africa must be selective. Secularism should apply to cultural contents of ATR but never to its scientific content. This means that, like for other fields of science, African governments must use, sustain, encourage, finance and protect the researches about the scientific content of ATR and sustain any activity related to the popularization of its knowledge. As far as ATR is concerned, the policy of secularism in Africa should be confined to its cultural contents only.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have handled the issue of secularism in African context and in relation to African traditional religion (ATR); we demonstrated that secularism is wrongly defined due to the use of European inherited or mimicked political standards.

We have explained that, while Western perception places religion out of the field of science as being merely “beliefs and opinions”, the naturalized epistemology of African indigenous knowledge demonstrates that religion is one of the three components of traditional science. Thus contrary to Western Christianity and to Islam, African traditional religion involves a scientific content explaining rationally the relationship between God, man and the universe and leading to a mathematical explanation of the dynamics of the temporal universe; but it includes also cultural contents necessitated by the need to apply the scientific religious principles in any given milieu.

Moreover, solar religion thus defined leads to a scientific and normative discourse of morality which gave birth to the ethics of *maât* and *ubuntu*; therefore the ATR gives African ethical policy a solid stand to resist the intrusion of debased Western relativism into the high morality our ancestors bequeathed to us.

Therefore, any strategy of secularization in Africa must first make the distinction between the scientific content of ATR and its cultural ones. Obviously African governments must adopt non-secular policy vis-à-vis the scientific aspects of ATR, as is the case for any science, and apply secularism, as far as the ATR is concerned, only toward its cultural contents.

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