

A critical evaluation of the writing methods of selected scholars of African culture and traditional religion – E. B. Idowu; E. G. Parrinder and K. A. Opoku

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Abstract

Every activity of man is often done in a certain way. This includes the study of religion. Scholars have generally adopted various methods in studying religion. Some of these methods have been classified as unacademic, while some are academic and scientific. It is accepted that the proper way to study religion academically is through the scientific method which is a systemic and objective analysis of religious phenomena (Kirkpatrick ed. 1159). Some other methods identified include: the polymethodic approach, descriptive approach, speculative approach, culture area approach. Others are the use of library, interviews, online sources and participant observation. This paper is an attempt to identify and critically evaluate the methods used by three scholars of African traditional religion and culture in presenting selected topics in their works. In the process, the merits and demerits will be highlighted and constructive suggestions will be given.

1. E. B. Idowu “The cult of Olodumare” in *Olodumare, God in Yoruba belief* pages 140-143

This chapter or topic appears to be a reaction by Idowu against the views of some western scholars like A. B. Ellis, Leo Frobenius and E. G. Parrinder, who wrote that Olodumare or supreme being, has no cult of worship offered to Him by the Yorubas, he sets out to refute their position and to argue that the supreme being is really worshipped (Idowu 141).

One methodological error here is that his approach appears to be tribalistic, nationalistic and apologetic. He aims at proving that Olodumare really has a cult of worship as opposed to the views of the western scholars.

This pre-conceived motive could hinder objectivity and corrupt his findings.

Another flaw is that, he allows elements of his religion (Christianity), to influence his writing. For instance, while trying to explain why the Yorubas do not erect temples to Olodumare, he quoted the Bible ‘To whom will ye liken God? Or what likeness will ye compare him?’ Isa. 40:18, to illustrate that God cannot be fully known (141). There is really no proof to show convincingly that the God in Christianity is the same Olodumare of the Yorubas. Here, he tends to develop his study through the Christian perspective.

Another aspect of Christianity that has influenced this writing is the presentation of Olodumare as being omnipresent, hence it is possible to pray intimately to Him anytime, anywhere, when necessary. However, on the same page, he admits that the Yorubas appear to be satisfied with the divinities with whom they are in immediate touch, because they believe that once the divinities receive their worship, they will transmit what is necessary of it to Olodumare (142).

There seems to be a contradiction here, because if the Yorubas appear to be quite satisfied with praying to the divinities, how come they still have the need to pray to Olodumare again? It seems, Idowu's Christian background may have made him to add this later view.

There is a degree of speculation in this writing as he states that the divinities transmit part of the worship they receive to Olodumare (142). But there is no way of proving or establishing this transmission of worship, neither has he cited any source for this information.

On the positive side, his method is also scientific to an extent, because he considers, classifies and systematizes observable facts in some issues, before making conclusions. For instance, he gives reasons why people believe Olodumare has no cult of worship, they include: the existence of other numerous cults for lower deities which overshadow that of Olodumare, the absence of

temples for Olodumare, the Yoruba tradition of approaching elders through intermediaries. He then goes on to describe a specific cult of Olodumare. These data are observable and verifiable just like one would treat scientific data. Hence, after a careful analysis of the verifiable data, one could readily agree with the relevant conclusion.

His method also involves a great reference to the culture of the Yorubas, as a means of explaining his topic. For instance, in explaining why the Yorubas do not openly worship Olodumare directly, he states that in Yoruba etiquette, it is wrong for a young person to approach an elder directly when he wants special favour or when he wants to apologise, rather he does that through an elder (141). An understanding of this cultural practice, helps to explain why the Yorubas do not approach Olodumare directly, but through divinities.

It also appears that he made use of the culture approach which is influenced or determined by the cultural background of the scholar. The author, Idowu, being a Yoruba man, had a Yoruba background. He must have imbibed the Yoruba culture and experiences which have influenced his presentations here.

However, it should be noted that he devoted most of the work, trying to explain why it appears the Yorubas do not worship Olodumare, whereas most of the work should have been devoted to explaining the worship of Olodumare, which is actually the title of the chapter.

On the whole, his work would have been quite satisfactory if he had fully explained the worship of Olodumare or alternatively if he had given it the title ‘why the Yorubas, appear not to worship Olodumare’.

2. G. Parrinder “witchcraft” in African traditional religion pages 122-134

The topic of this write up ‘witchcraft’ in African traditional religion, is non empirical and cannot be scientifically tested. Thus the author Parrinder utilizes the method of objectively describing the views and feelings of the Africans towards witchcraft while he also makes some conclusions in the process.

For instance through interviews, he discovers and highlights the African view of a witch, the distinction between a witch and a sorcerer and their activities and mode of operation. He also touches witchhunting, confession of witches, the social significance of witchcraft and its future.

In this writing, he has done his best to present the African view and belief on witchcraft. This is a good way to study, analyse and present such issues which cannot be scientifically verified. The author is in a good position to do an objective research and presentation, because he is not an African and does not believe in witchcraft, neither does he claim to be a wizard/witch. He also goes on to make up some theories and conclusions from the information he has gathered from the Africans. For instance, in analyzing the belief that a new witch is often

required to bring the soul of one of her children as a fee, he theorises that, this may be the reason for the excessive child mortality in Africa (127).

He also observes that there are more female witches than male, and adds that this may be due to the conflict between the sexes and the attempt by men to always subjugate women. Thus, they always accuse only women. He concludes that some women confess to being witches due to their weaknesses and neurosis, although they may not really be witches (131). This manner of presentation is appropriate and scientific, as he has analysed the available information before making conclusions.

Another positive aspect of his work is the utilization of other publications on the subject. For instance, he cites the meanings of wizard and witch from the Oxford Dictionary, and also cites Professor Evans Pritchard's attempts to show that the Azande distinguished between witches and sorcerers (123). These references provide guidance for him.

On the other hand, the work contains some flaws. The writer has generalized a lot. He states that "west African beliefs show the same distinction of witchcraft from sorcery. The work of witches is similar to that of other parts of Africa (123)".

This sort of statement is improper in a scholarly research because there are many west African communities. It is impossible for the author to have sampled

all of them, and he did not credit the statement to anyone. This implies that he was generalizing.

He also cites so many African communities in his attempt to describe witchcraft such as South Africans, Azandes, Nupes, Bamucapis of Rhodesia, Yorubas, Ugandans and Kenyans. In referring to so many areas, he has not done an indepth analysis of witchcraft in any particular area, rather he has only given superficial analysis of a small aspect of witchcraft in these different areas. It would have been better if he had concentrated on one or two areas and written extensively on their views on witchcraft. Nevertheless, this is still a good presentation of the beliefs and views of some African communities on witchcraft.

3. K. A. Opoku “The Ancestors” in West African Traditional Religion pages 35-53
Opoku, in this topic, examines the belief of the west Africans about their ancestors, their importance to the Africans, qualifications for becoming an ancestor and the ways the people relate with and regard their ancestors.

However, one methodological flaw here is the use of much generalisations. For instance, when he was explaining the origin of the ancestors, he stated that west Africans generally believe that the departed ones enter into a spiritual state of existence after their death (35). This sort of generalization permeates the whole write up, and it is questionable because it is impossible for one person to verify

the views of all West African peoples. He also makes indiscriminate and superficial references to several communities without an indepth analysis of any.

Secondly, the author, being an African and a believer in the ancestors, tends to be influenced by that belief. For instance he states that “the dead do not sever their links with their kinsmen, but continue to be members of their individual families, fulfilling their obligations as elders” (27). This statement implies that he believes in the ancestors, and he appears to be presenting his beliefs as a fact, and there is no indication of how to verify this view, neither has he stated that he is only reporting the belief of the Africans.

On the other hand, there are positive aspects in his method. For instance, he has given a lot of descriptions and facts about the Africans reverential conception of the ancestors and tries to explain that people revere them, because Africans often respect old age. The examination of data, followed by a conclusion, makes the work to be scientific to an extent.

Furthermore, the writer also tries to highlight the link and influence of culture on religion and vice versa, as a means of explaining the African attitude to ancestors. For instance he mentions some festivals and adds that they are the expressions of the African caring attitude to the ancestors. He states that most of the festivals are centered around the periodic feeding of the ancestors, whose well being is sought through such rites (37).

Another advantage here is that, as an ‘insider’ the author is able to give the African view of the concept of the ancestors. The African is in a better position to do this than a non-African who is an outsider, because the ancestors are supernatural members of African families and are very close to them.

Conclusions and recommendations

These scholars have given fair insights and adopted various methods in their writings. Their work contain some pitfalls and merits.

For instance, Idowu tends to be nationalistic and apologetic or defensive in his presentation. He also views the topic from a Christian perspective. Nevertheless, the work is still relevant academically, because he has given an African viewpoint, and has made a great reference to African culture in explaining the topic.

Parrinder’s work on ‘witchcraft’ is more objective than Idowu’s work on ‘Olodumare’. Parrinder is an outsider and a non believer in the topic of his writing, hence he is able to give a disinterested account of the issue. But this makes him unable to feel and understand witchcraft like the African scholar would. He does not have the true insider view, so as to really know how the African feels.

Moreover, Parrinder also makes much generalisations and indiscriminate references to many African communities without showing how he got these information.

Opoku's work on the 'ancestors' is also beset with this same problem of generalization and excessive references. He also gives the impression that he is a believer in what he is studying, thus objectivity is not quite guaranteed. But on the other hand, he has given an inside and an African viewpoint of the topic. His belief in the ancestors does enhance the writing, because he is able to gather, interpret and explain the data on this topic more than outsiders.

In view of the above observations, it is hereby advocated that the following steps should be observed and adopted by scholars and writers in the arts and humanities, especially in religious and cultural studies in presenting their works. They should avoid much generalisations and concentrate more on indepth analysis of selected sample areas in order to ensure accuracy. They should carefully analyse data or information before making conclusions.

The adoption or presentation of the 'insider' or participant observation view should be done in such an objective way that it does not dilute the accuracy of the presentation.

Furthermore, scholars and writers of religious studies and culture should endeavor to have an idea of the link between the two(insider and objective), and

also that both influence each other and enhance the understanding of each other.

This has been illustrated in this work.

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