Playing God: Human Agents and the Punishment of Evil in African Religion

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Abstract

This study examines the concept of "Playing God: Human Agents and the Punishment of Evil in African Religion." It explores the complex relationship between human agency and the punishment of evil within African religious systems. The study investigates the various ways in which African religions conceptualise and enact punishment for immoral or evil acts, focusing on the role of human agents in administering and carrying out these punishments. Drawing upon a multidisciplinary approach that incorporates cultural anthropology, religious studies, and ethics, this research delves into the diverse religious traditions across the African continent. It explores how African religious systems incorporate the notion of divine punishment as a means to maintain social order, uphold moral standards, and deter individuals from engaging in immoral behaviour. The study also examines the underlying theological and philosophical foundations that inform the punishment of evil within African religious frameworks. It explores concepts such as karma, ancestral spirits, and divine justice, investigating how these beliefs shape the understanding of punishment and its significance in African religious thought. Furthermore, the research explores the roles and responsibilities of human agents in the administration of punishment. It examines the cultural and societal mechanisms through which individuals are designated as agents of divine justice, and the rituals or practices associated with punishment within African religious communities. The findings of this study shed light on the diversity and complexity of African religious systems and their approaches to the punishment of evil. It highlights the cultural, ethical, and theological considerations that underpin these practices, offering insights into the values and beliefs that shape African societies. The implications of this study extend beyond academic discourse. Understanding how African religious systems address the punishment of evil has practical relevance for contemporary issues such as crime, justice, and moral behaviour in African societies. By gaining insights into the mechanisms of punishment and deterrence in African religions, policymakers, scholars, and practitioners can engage in more culturally sensitive and contextually relevant approaches to crime prevention and justice. This study investigates the intricate relationship between human agency and the punishment of evil in African religion. It explores the diverse religious traditions, theological foundations, and cultural practices associated with punishment in African societies. The research contributes to our understanding of African religious systems and their implications for moral behaviour, justice, and social order in contemporary African contexts.

Keywords: Playing God, Human Agents, Punishment, Evil, African Religion.

Introduction

In all of human history, mankind has never condoned evil for humanity decry evil. This

applies to the religious traditions that man adheres to. Because evil breed suffering, pain and misery in society, doing no one any good; the supreme spirit himself punishes evil so as to deter other evil minded persons from wreaking havoc on society with evil deeds. Relatedly, punishment often goes with reward and this seems to have divine origins as indicated above. In this wise, correct, wise or good behaviour/deed attracts reward and incorrect, foolish and evil behaviour/deed attracts punishment. The implication here is that even though evil cannot be necessarily stopped completely; it has no place in the scheme of things in human societies, because society abhors evil.

The preceding line of thought explains why there are both divine and human mechanisms for the punishment of evil. Thus, to punish is to correct a deviance in behaviour and put the person aright. In the sphere of religion, punishment is meant to correct a person who has transgressed on divine injunctions in order to right the wrong. This explains why some member[s] of a religious community could be ex-communicated for perceived wrongs committed by them. In the Roman Catholic Church for instance, the sacrament of penance reconciles a person who has transgressed on divine injunctions with God; reestablishing a cordial relationship. This implies that wrong doing separates the person from his/her God.

Another institution that abhors indiscipline and squarely punishes any wrong or evil behaviour is the school. Teachers reward right behaviour and punish wrong or evil behaviour. This also applies to the family where parents take as their cardinal responsibility of ensuring right behaviour to punish any deviancy in any one of its members.

From the foregone, it can be argued that punishment is not an act of hatred meted on the person being punished; but rather, it is meant to correct acts of transgressions or deviancy regarding certain set rules, regulations and standard of behaviour – divine or human. Thus, for an armed robber sent to serve a jail sentence in a correctional facility or centre (prison) is not an act of hatred but for such a person to reform his/her character in tandem with the expected societal norms.

In most religious traditions of the world, the prerogative of punishing evil lies squarely with the supreme spirit and even where some other lesser beings are seen in the picture; for instance, angels in Christianity and Islam, they do this on the direction of God – the supreme spirit. This is saying that they merely carry out the instructions issued to them by God. However, the reverse is the case in African Religion where God is often out of the picture in the punishment of evil; a role that human agents have effectively assumed. For instance, among the Tiv, the *tyô* constituted by the elders of a kin group could punish all sorts of evil perpetrations in society on behalf of Aondo – the supreme spirit without any qualms. This explains why Tarnande (2005) pronounced that the *tyô* has the power of life and death over the members of a community of its jurisdiction. It should be noted that each kindred in Tiv society has its own *tyô* council of elders who "govern" and see to the day to day the running and general wellbeing of that kindred or clan.

It is in the light of the above that the paper seeks to examine the place of human agents who play preponderant roles in the punishment of evil in African Religion and why God –

the supreme spirit is often out of the picture and yet society is ran orderly for the peace and general wellbeing of individual members of the community or society.

The Concept, Evil

The concept sin and evil are almost synonymous and are sometimes interchangeably used to refer to wrongdoing or transgression by an individual(s) regarding set rules, often divine injunctions. To this, Conner (1980: 137-138) sees sin as implying an offence, trespass, revolt, transgression and perversion often followed by penalty, sacrifice and expiation to right the wrong.

In his submission, Anyacho (2005: 78) posits that the problem of sin and evil is an important issue in philosophical and theological discourse. Adopting the Judeo-Christian and Islamic religions, he defined sin/evil as rebellion against God or transgression against the law or acts which are contrary to Allah's will or prevent a person from submitting completely to Allah. It follows then that anything which is contrary to the will of God is a sin/evil. This is because such occurrences have the propensity to disrupt the order of the orderly creation of God thereby bringing about sorrow, distress or calamity for society. Sin and evil in this perspective could be likened to the phenomenon of physical pain, mental suffering and moral wickedness (Anyacho, 2005:78). From the foregone discussion, evil has been classified by scholars in the following broad categories:

Natural/metaphysical evil which refers to sufferings and pain which humans experience as a result of natural disasters such as earth quakes, storms, pestilence and flooding to mention but a few. The recent flooding in Nigeria have claimed scores of the lives of humans and animals as well as public and private infrastructure and properties. This has brought untold hardships on the people. Anyacho argues that while the natural evil may not be necessarily caused by man; some could be attributed to man's selfishness and unfriendly attitude to nature (Anyacho, 2005:79).

On the one hand, *physical and mental evil* has to do with anything which brings physical, body and mental pains to the individual. For instance, disease, illness and death creates physical and mental pain in man. For *moral evil*, it constitutes all forms of vice, avarice and wickedness which find their roots in the selfishness and inhumanity to fellow humans These can be seen in moral evils such as injustice, cruelty, greed, hate, divorce, bribery and corruption and the oppression of the poor (Anyacho, 2005:79-80).

An exploration of the possible origin of evil by theologians and religious scholars has given credence to several theories including the Augustinian and Irenaen theodicies. From an African perspective, Mbiti (1969: 205) avers that most African societies are of the view that God did not create what was evil and does them no evil either. As far as the various African myths are concerned when God created man originally, there was harmony and family relationship between the two; and the first men enjoyed only what was good. It would seem therefore that from the revealed religions of Christianity and Islam as well as the Indigenous African Religion; God is conceived of as being absolutely good and does not intend evil for

man but as put forward by Vershima (2022:76), man is the architect of the evil he experiences in his daily life.

Viewing Evil from the Lenses of the African

In African cosmological thought, man is at the centre of creation and of the world. Based on this standpoint, it is very easy to decipher that which constitutes evil in the eyes of the African; and that is the fact that anything which threatens the general wellbeing of the African and that of his/her community is seen as evil. This conception is so held because the African believes that the world is made for the wellbeing of man and his network of relationships and anything that interferes or interrupts the smooth flow of this continuum and brings with it suffering, sorrow, pain, anguish and heartbreak is evil. In view of this, the African in his dealings is to maintain a cordial relationship with the regulating forces, mystic and spiritual forces via sacrifice and propitiation for the wellbeing of his/herself and his/her community.

In sharing the above thought, Kanu (2015:203) aver that there is an ontological link of the different spheres of the cosmic order such that what affects one sphere necessarily affects the other. In Tiv cosmological thought therefore, an issue which threatens the cosmic order is termed as *ifyer kwagh* (evil). *ifyer kwagh* is not limited to the under listed: *ku* (death), *anger* (illness), *tambe* (bewitchment), arson, fornication/ adultery, poor harvest, casting spell on a neighbour's farm/ livestock/ properties, incest as well as *u vihin or wan* i.e 'spoiling' a person's child (carnal knowledge/ cast spells) or maltreating an orphan or widow etc.

It is instructive to note as does Downes (1971:65) that of all these forms of evil, the Tiv consider murder a very dangerous act of evil. This is because the act of *iwoo or* (murder) arouses the anger not only of the relatives; but the action of bloodshed inadvertently sets in motion the force of the *akombo a swendegh* (blood guardian/violent death) as does also incest or adultery. Downes (1971:66) further observed correctly so that, the unpardonable act of sin (evil) recognized by the Tiv, the cause and the motive of all malpractices is the unconstitutional use of *tsav* (witchcraft). This may be characterized by wanton killings, affliction and other forms of evil that brings sorrow and pains to the Tiv. All the above bring untold suffering and hardship to the whole community and the Tiv are not at rest until the requisite rituals are made in sacrifice to reverse the evil for the overall wellbeing of the community.

Ezeanya cited by Kanu (2015: 203) further identifies other forms of evil recognized by Africans to include: epidemics, sickness of all sorts, accidents, fire outbreak, natural disasters like flood and earthquakes which he observes were all attributed to the influence of the powers above man, both good and evil showing their displeasure at human actions and or behaviour. In all of these, the Africans particularly believe that human beings are responsible for the phenomenon of evil hence in the very beginning of creation; everything was in its perfect state and humans did not experience suffering, pain and sorrow until man unilaterally broke that state of bliss by his disobedience.

 A Tiv myth in support of the above claim, posits that *Aondo*-supreme being created the world and everything in it including humans, animals and plants. According to this myth, there was a state of tranquility characterized by good health and abundance. *Aondo* daily made the rounds amongst the Tiv and interacted with them. However, *Aondo* withdrew from the Tiv having been hit in the face repeatedly by a woman pounding yams making *Aondo* to withdraw from the affairs of the Tiv (Wang, 2004).

The above scenario brought about suffering for the Tiv as they were left all alone to manage their affairs. Thus, the advent of evil in African religious thought is firmly attributed to the irresponsible behaviour of man as shown in the Tiv myth. Kanu (2015:205) therefore rightly proffered that, the above understanding of the origin of evil and human suffering places the human person at the centre of it. This according to him is the case, in the sense that since human beings are finite and limited in perfection and can never be otherwise, they inadvertently continue to instigate evil and suffering in the world.

It is also worthy to note that for the African an evil that has befallen a person in the present, and which brings about untold hardships and suffering may not necessarily be the fault of the person per se; but it could be an evil committed by the person's ancestor(s), those who had lived in a preceding generation. This explains why the African never takes lightly the influence of retribution hence an evil committed by an individual in this present age outlives the person and his/her generation unto succeeding generations until the evil is blotted out via sacrifices.

In view of the above, African societies have different mechanisms aimed at controlling the influence of evil. Shishima (2014:61) identifies these mechanisms amongst others to include: oracles and ordeals. The oracles may be consulted in the detection of evil because Africans belief they are the media by which answers to problems beyond human knowledge are sought and obtained. Relatedly, Kanu (2015:205) identifies the use of divination as being significant to Africans especially the Igbo to know the source of their problems. The later statement on the Igbo is significant and could be well applied to other African ethnic nationalities because in the days of trouble; the victims would often ask: why me? What have I done? What is behind these evils befalling me? But with the instrumentality of divination, the African surely gets to the source of his/her problems.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Cultural Anthropology and the Deterrent Theory of Punishment as framework of analysis.

The Cultural anthropology provides a lens for examining the beliefs, rituals, and social structures within African societies. Cultural Anthropology is a theoretical framework that emerged as a discipline in the late 19th century, with scholars such as Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski being instrumental in its development (Handwerker, 2002: 106). It aims to understand and interpret human cultures and societies by employing ethnographic methods and participant observation. Cultural Anthropology assumes that culture is a

complex system of beliefs, values, practices, and social norms that shape human behaviour and worldview.

One of the major assumptions of Cultural Anthropology is that cultural practices and beliefs are learned and transmitted within societies. It recognises that African religions have diverse manifestations across different regions and communities, emphasising the importance of understanding local contexts and cultural variations. This framework acknowledges the agency of human beings in shaping and interpreting religious practices, including the punishment of evil. Cultural Anthropology's strength lies in its holistic approach to studying human cultures. It allows researchers to explore the interconnectedness of various cultural aspects, including religious beliefs, rituals, social structures, and power dynamics. By adopting this framework, scholars can delve into the social and cultural contexts within African societies, uncovering how the punishment of evil is understood, enacted, and embedded in the fabric of these communities.

However, Cultural Anthropology also faces certain weaknesses. It is important to recognize that anthropological research has historically been influenced by biases and Eurocentric perspectives. Scholars must navigate these challenges and strive for cultural sensitivity and reflexivity in their studies. Additionally, due to the vast diversity of African religions, it can be challenging to make broad generalizations or reach definitive conclusions about the punishment of evil across the entire continent.

In the study on "Playing God: Human Agents and the Punishment of Evil in African Religion," Cultural Anthropology was applied to analyse and interpret the cultural meanings and practices surrounding the punishment of evil within specific African religious traditions. The researcher employed the ethnographic methods, such as participant observation, interviews, and textual analysis, to gain insights into how individuals and communities perceive and address evil and its consequences. Thus, by employing Cultural Anthropology, the researcher explored how the punishment of evil is embedded within the social fabric of African societies. The study investigated the roles of religious leaders, community members, and individuals in enacting or seeking divine retribution for evil acts. This framework allowed for an examination of the relationships between punishment, justice, morality, and the agency of human beings within African religious contexts. Moreover, Cultural Anthropology enabled an exploration of the cultural variation and diversity within African religions. The study explored religious traditions, rituals, and beliefs across regions and communities so as to identify the conceptualisations and practices related to the punishment of evil, shedding light on the nuanced perspectives that exist within African religious systems.

Overall, cultural Anthropology offered a valuable theoretical framework for the study of "Playing God: Human Agents and the Punishment of Evil in African Religion." It's holistic and contextually grounded approach allowed the researcher to investigate the multifaceted dimensions of the punishment of evil, considering cultural variations, local practices, and the agency of human actors within African religious contexts. While being aware of its limitations and historical biases, Cultural Anthropology provided a fruitful

avenue for understanding the complex interplay between culture, religion, and punishment in African societies.

The deterrent theory of punishment is a theoretical framework that posits that punishment acts as a deterrent to potential offenders. It suggests that individuals refrain from committing crimes due to the fear of experiencing negative consequences, such as punishment. The framework emphasises the importance of the perceived costs and benefits of engaging in criminal behaviour.

The origin of the deterrent theory of punishment can be traced back to classical criminological theories, particularly the works of Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham. Beccaria's influential work, *On Crimes and Punishments* (1764), highlighted the need for proportionate and certain punishment to deter criminal behaviour. The major assumptions of the deterrent theory include the belief that individuals are rational actors who weigh the potential costs and benefits before engaging in criminal acts. It assumes that punishment, in the form of severe and certain penalties, can deter individuals from committing crimes. The theory also assumes that the fear of punishment operates as a deterrent mechanism in society.

Strengths of the deterrent theory include its intuitive appeal, as it aligns with common sense notions of punishment as a means to prevent crime. It also provides a framework for understanding the role of punishment in social control. Furthermore, research has shown that the perceived risk of punishment can influence individuals' decision-making processes. However, the deterrent theory of punishment has faced criticisms and weaknesses. Some argue that the theory overemphasises the role of punishment and neglects other factors influencing criminal behaviour, such as socioeconomic conditions or psychological factors. Critics also highlight that individuals may not always act rationally and may not accurately assess the potential costs and benefits of their actions. Additionally, the theory assumes a homogeneous response to punishment, whereas individuals may have different levels of susceptibility to deterrence.

Regarding its application to the study on the topic "PLAYING GOD: HUMAN AGENTS AND THE PUNISHMENT OF EVIL IN AFRICAN RELIGION," the deterrent theory of punishment may have limited direct applicability. African religious systems often have their own mechanisms of punishment and retribution for evil acts, which may not necessarily align with the concept of deterrence found in Western legal systems. However, the theory provided a comparative framework to analyse the role of punishment in different cultural contexts and to examine how deterrent factors, such as the fear of divine punishment, may influence moral behaviour within African religious systems.

Playing God: Human Agents and the Punishment of Evil in African Religion

Kajo (2007:71) defining punishment from the ethical perspective says it is the deliberate deprivation or imposition of an unpleasant experience by one person upon another owing to the latter's actual or supposed misdeeds that is knowingly and deliberately committed. He maintained that the misdeed could be attributed to the violation of either an act which

should not have been performed (which becomes and offence or commission) or an in-action when action was expected.

In the like manner, punishment could also imply, causing a person to suffer from either physical or psychological discomfort or pain and could include measures such as canning, fining, imprisonment and execution (Kajo, 2007:72); depending on the magnitude of the said misdeed or evil committed. Punishment thus, is geared towards improving the moral character of the offender. In the words of Bowie (2004:265), any system of justice must be morally justified as to why an individual may be punished. This argument took him to examining the three traditional theories of punishment namely, *deterrence*, *retribution* and *reformation*.

Deterrence has to do with the act of punishment discouraging others from doing the same, by focusing their minds on the consequences that will befall them should they decide to follow the same course of action. Similarly, *retribution* sees punishment as something that is owed to a criminal/law breaker as payment for the crime/offence committed; while *reformation* aims at converting the criminal/law breaker through correction and rehabilitation (Bowie, 2004:267); which explains why there are correctional facilities (prisons) built to reform character in human societies; traditional and modern.

On the one hand, an agent refers to a person who acts in the stead of another. By this understanding, the agent exerts such power because s/he has the power to act in such a capacity. In the light of the above, Salifu (2014: 106) drawing inference from Idoma Religion explains that because of the remoteness of God – the supreme spirit; the people in need of something to fill the void between man and God make recourse to various human agents as a channel of reaching him, and also in punishing evil.

The punishment of evil in African Religion does not take the conventionally known procedure observable with the revealed religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam; where God is at the centre of the pronouncement and execution of punishment on his supplicants who transgress against divine rules or perform some such other acts of misdeed either by omission or commission. God's punitive actions were not restricted to his chosen Jews or Israelites but extended to other races who sought to undermine his sovereignty and integrity (cf. Gen.3, 6,7; Exod. 7-11; 14, 32, 34; Daniel) etc.

In African Religion, the human agents play God by assuming his roles or place in pronouncing punishment on erring members or supplicants. Opoku (1977: 160) subscribes to the above where he posits: rewards and punishments are not meted out by Supernatural beings only; human society (human agents) has its own reward and punishment. Shishima (2014: 60) also affirms that God's functionaries (human agents) punish human beings for various vices which are detrimental to harmonious relationship and welfare for the community. Shishima identifies the following human agents who administer or prescribe punishment for evil acts in African Religion outside the purview of God to include: deities and divinities, ancestors, traditional rulers, priests/priestesses, clan elders (2014:60). Among the Tiv, the *tyô/ityô* plays a fundamental role in the punishment of evil in Tiv society. Commenting on this, Gbenda (2005:184) states that:

The promoters and custodians of ethical values are the elders among others. The elders are the custodians of ancestral blessings. When elders of respective families come together, they constitute a corporate body called *ityô*. Their meeting in the day time has its correspondence in the invisible world where important matters are discussed and decisions implemented in the day time. The elders have power to decide on one's life span and death. They (*tyô*) also have power to revive a dead person who was killed unjustifiably for him/her to continue his/her normal life.

From the above analysis, it is evident that elders or *tyô* among the Tiv play an important role in the punishment of evil. This is because at their disposal to operate with are the *akombo* (mystic forces) to punish those who live unethical lives or neglect tradition. According to Gbenda (2005:184), this is achieved through the God-given potency of *tsav* (witchcraft). Thus, through *tsav* and *akombo*, the *tyô* invoke their ancestors who are the invisible guardians of morality. It is because of the all-important role of *ityô* in Tiv society that the Tiv Christine their children *Tyôhemba* (kinsmen are supreme or supremacy of the kinsmen), *Tyônenge* (kinsmen see/watch), *Tyôwua* (Kinsmen have killed) and *Tyôna* (kinsmen have given), etc.

To bring punishment for any misdeed, the *tyô* could *tambe* (bewitch) the culprit, afflictions of all sorts with the height of the punishments being the payment of the supreme price – death; if the culprit does not take necessary steps at restitution. The *tyô* takes such punitive measures including the death of the culprit so as to prevent members of the society from endangering the welfare of the entire Tivland (Gbenda, 2005:187).

Consequent upon the above, the human agents could also masquerade as spirits in their attempt to settle disputes and punish evil in African societies. For instance, among the Tiv, the human agents assume the role of *azov/adzov* (spirits) who are primordial beings in their attempt to punish evil, wrought justice and enhance compliance. Commenting on the scenario above, Hembe (2003:59) explains that in the Tiv political revolts of 1960 and 1964, the revolt party presented themselves as *azov* relying heavily on body protectors such as *gberkpugh* (medicine against all weapons including guns and machetes) and *madufu* (invisibility charm) etc. Also, where an individual purchases a piece of land but refuses to 'settle' the elders of the community, they [elders] instigate the youths who masquerading as *azov* obstruct construction work, threatening the workers and sometimes pulling down some structures in the dead of night as a warning to the defaulting land owner and or developer, his agent(s) and workers to own up or face dare consequences.

On this, Hembe (2003) offers an explanation by stating that the Tiv believe strongly that *azov* exist and they are regarded as the unseen counterparts of man that participate in all human activities. They are considered as a group of omnipresent beings who stand ready to avenge the injustice that has been inflicted on the *tar* (land/society). Because they are considered to be usually in constant interaction with human beings; proper care is taken to avoid the possibility of their being offended. This explains why in times or disorder in Tiv society, it is the *ijov* (singular of *azov*) that calls the attention of everybody to the impending doom and threaten to intervene. In the event that the people and their rulers/leaders fail to

heed the warning, the *azov* would descend on them with dare consequences (Hembe, 2003:63-64). The *azov* could similarly scare infiltrating herdsmen and their herds from straying into farmlands and destroying crops. In the event that they are not deterred, the *azov* would scavenge on and kill the cattle.

Adega (2019: 255-257) intimates that among the Idoma of Benue State, the human agents masquerading as *Alekwu* (ancestral spirits) perform the role of identifying and punishing evil culprits during the *Eje-Alekwu* festival. The same scenario is witnessed during the *Ai-Agboko* festival of Otukpo. Also, masquerading as spirits, the human agents could settle disputes among humans as could be seen with the *Egwugwu* amongst the Igbo (Achebe, 1958: 67).

From the foregone, it is worthy to observe that the punishment of evil by the human agents in African Religion is often instant, swift and spontaneous. In most cases, punitive actions include death to serve as deterrent to others. Thus, the punitive agents and spirits do not allow evil to persist or pervade the society before taking action. This phenomenon is opposed to the practice in Judaism, Christianity and Islam where the offender is often given a "second chance" over his/her misdeeds. It is in this perspective that most commentators on African Religion including some Africans i.e Christians/Muslims conceive such punitive action as harsh.

Decrying the above misapplication/misuse of power by the human agents in their dealings with members of their communities, Aghamelu (2005: 155) observes that... despite the revelation and discoveries being witnessed in some parts of Africa/Nigeria concerning the deities and injustices being perpetrated against some people or group of people in the guise of "order" from the gods, shrine or oracle, people still allow themselves and their loved ones to be enslaved spiritually, socially and psychologically in the name of these traditions.

She maintained that, the strict adherence to tradition at all cost is traceable to the selfish interest of few people in the society who create unnecessary fear and punishment for violators of these unwholesome traditions. According to her, these leaders /human agents make their subjects believe that these traditions are decrees from the gods and must never be violated hence their violation is punished by the gods by death or wretch (Aghamelu, 2005:155). While Aghamelu is understandably worried over these abuses and misuse of power by the human agents, it is worthy to note that no one religion ever claims that its sacred codes, laws and injunctions are creations of mere mortals – this would render such codes ineffective and inoperative as no man would be ready to adhere to the codes of men. When Moses brought the Decalogue from the mountain of Sinai did he claim ownership of the codes, Yahweh's? (cf. Exod. 20:1ff).

The same scenario played out when Prophet Mohammed who on receipt of the code of Islam on mount *Hira.* He did not claim that it was his message to humanity but Allah's. Indeed, it was Allah who through the angel Jibril told him to recite and equally delivered Allah's message to humanity, not man. Jesus equally told his followers that he was teaching them the message he had received from his father. This, he repeated when he sent the apostles (cf. Jn. 20:1ff). These are the mysteries that are associated with religion and

completely understanding these mysteries has posed a lot of challenges to the spiritual but mundane man from time immemorial.

In another dimension, it is very easy to read in between the lines that the spontaneous reactions of the human agents not only enhance compliance but creates order in society. For instance, it is because of the instant response in the punishment of evil that most Tiv would in contemporary times opt for *the Bible and the Qu'ran as tools for taking oath of office or in law courts as opposed to Swem* because the latter would react instantly with punitive measures as opposed to the docile Bible and Quran that would take time to react that is if at all they do react.

The Luke warmness and slow response to punishing evil in the revealed religions particularly Christianity explains why perpetrators of evil in African societies find solace in its abode and shades. It is not an exaggeration to state that a dozen escapee adherents of African Religion have taken refuge in the church, fleeing repercussion for the sorrows they have caused persons in their society. These at best can be said to be nominal Christians who are not well grounded in the Christian faith. These have become Christians in their bid to escape punishment from the evils they committed. These category of "Christians" claim immunity of attack and harm from African Religious punitive mechanisms after such relocations to the church.

It is to be noted that, the punishment of evil in African Religion is predicated on the principle of the human agents or any one member of the community "seeing/witnessing" the evil committed. This implies that any act of evil committed in the society/community and witnessed by the individual(s) and human agents never escapes punishment. For instance, the eating of dogs is a taboo in Tiv religious culture; however, if an individual eats dogs by act of omission or commission, but nobody witnessed it and the elders thus, did not get to hear or known about it, such a person advertently "escapes" punishment because the human agents were not in the know.

This scenario is applicable to the Igbo society. On this, Achebe (1958:21-22) reports that when Okonkwo mercilessly beat his youngest wife – Ojiugo during the week of peace preceding the planting of crops for not preparing his afternoon meal on time having gone to plait her hair; For dishonouring Ani, the goddess of the earth, Ezeani the priest pronounced the fine for this misdemeanour with one she-goat, a hen, a length of cloth and a hundred cowries. The human agents were very alive to their responsibilities in this instance. Okonkwo's singular action was capable of throwing the whole community in turmoil if the Ani, the earth deity felt slighted and cursed the earth not to bring forth bountiful yields that cropping season.

Similarly, in further concretising the fact that the human agents need to be in the know for punishment to be prescribed for any act of sin, evil and misdeed in African Religion is affirmed when one of the Christian converts in Mbanta clan killed the sacred python of the community. According to Achebe (1958:114), the royal python – the emanation of the god of water was the most revered animal in Mbanta and all the surrounding clans. In the Mbanta, tradition dictated that, if a person killed the royal python, accidentally, s/he made

sacrifices of atonement climaxed with performing an expensive burial ceremony (for the python) such as was done for a great man. No punishment was prescribed for a person who killed the python knowingly, for the people of Mbanta never anticipated that such a thing could ever happen (Achebe, 1958:114).

However, when the abominable act was committed by the Christian convert, the clan first took it that it never happened at all because in the first instance, "no one had actually seen the Christian convert do it –i.e kill the python" (Achebe, 1958:114). Deliberating on this evil which had befallen Mbanta clan and how to wriggle out of the quagmire, one of the elders cautioned:

It is not our custom to fight for our gods. Let us not presume to do so now. If a man kills the sacred python in the secrecy of his hut, the matter lies between him and the god. "We did not see it" (Achebe, 1958: 115).

The elders had cleverly and cautiously reasoned that if they put themselves between the god and his victim, they could also inadvertently receive the blows intended for the offender (Achebe, 1958:115). Relatedly, in Tiv religious culture too, the principle of *ityonenge* (the elders have seen) applies. Where, the *tyo* (elders) do not *nenge* (see), the matter lies between man and his god.

Apart from the above instance being the way Christian converts provoke their first or aboriginal faith on conversion to the new faith – Christianity and perhaps to an extent Islam through deeds and utterances. It also shows how African Religion as a religion of peace that abhors violence and unnecessarily provocation of the faith of others; even when its own sacred institutions, symbols and personages are assaulted and insulted or put to public ridicule maintains its calm. This is one of the greatest virtues and assets of African Religion. The virtues of respect for the faith of others also explains why it does not publicly canvass for converts from other religions and even when it adherents are lured to other religions, it is not bothered or shaken because it is an enduring religion which has survived and shall continue to survive against all odds.

Among the Tiv, the *ityô* (kinsmen) play an important role in the day to day running and maintenance of law and order in the society. Most often, an aggrieved person would say *iityô ngi nengen hanma kwagh cii* (the *iityô* is seeing/watching everything) and would thus avenge for the person. From the above, it can be said that any evil committed in the community but not witnessed by anybody could likely escape punishment and or if the *iityô* deliberately decides to turn a blind eye to any act of evil in the community.

This is where the punishment of evil in African Religion significantly differs from that of the revealed religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam where it is held that God sees every evil committed by humans even those sins committed in secret and punishes offenders appropriately. However, in reality, Shishima (2014:60) explains that God himself punishes human beings for various vices which are detrimental to harmonious relationship and welfare of the community in African Religion. Mbiti (1969:210) also postulates that for the majority of African peoples, God punishes in this life because he is concerned with the moral life of mankind, and thus upholds the moral law. He maintains that for a few exceptions,

Africans do not hold the belief that a person is punished in the afterlife for the wrongs committed in his/her life time.

Moreover, if God is not visibly seen in the punishment of evil in African Religion; but the deities/human agents, it is because as Gbadebo (2005:146) argues, God is conceived like a monarch, an absolute monarch surrounded by his chiefs (deities) who are at his service. It is the deities/human agents who execute his orders and carry out his wishes. In which case whether he executes the punishment for evil or not the human agents – the deities and human agents who do this do so not without his knowledge or directives.

Conclusion

The paper has examined the phenomenon of the role of human agents in the punishment of evil in African Religion. It has established that each community of the African society has its own set form of restitution and punishment for various offences, both legal and moral. As Mbiti (1969: 211) points out, these range from death for offences like practising sorcery, witchcraft and committing murder and adultery, to payment of fines of cattle, chicken, sheep/goat or money for minor cases like unintentional injury to one's companion or when stray animals eat crops on farmlands in a neighbour's fields. Among the Tiv, Gbenda (2005:183) avers that a person who commits incest by having sexual intercourse with close relative normally would undergo a fire purification ritual cleansing of *nande ken tyumbe* (being burnt in a hut). According to him though the hut is set alight in the purification rites; the culprits are not allowed to be consumed by the fire, but they run out of the burning hut naked and are rescued, publicly severing the inappropriate relationship. He further pointed out that in a bid to prevent members of society from endangering the welfare of the entire Tivland, the elders (human agents) who are the promoters and custodians of ethical values enforce a code of conduct that manifests as taboos, prohibitions and laws which are not human inventions but enshrined in Tiv Religion (Gbenda, 2005:187).

In the event that a culprit refuses to perform the requisite rituals to remedy for his/her misdeeds; Gbadebo (2005: 149) informs that: when the authority of a deity has been established through evidence of some sorts, some men may ask, what if I refuse to obey the orders of a god?; in such a situation, the deity may intervene directly and may deal with the disobedient person by subjecting him/her to misfortune, curse, illness and even death. He explains further that among the Yoruba, Esu the deity for discipline punishes all those who refuse to carry out propitiatory sacrifices for misbehaviour.

Similarly, Anyacho (2005: 276) points out that the African society recognises punishment and reward as consequences of sin and goodness. Thus, life in the hereafter is determined here on earth. Therefore, to qualify for the land of the ancestors, a person must live a good life built on the acceptable traditional values such as industry, justice, kindness, love, peace and respect to the laws of the land, honesty etc. as such, the ability of an ancestor to reincarnate is one of the greatest signs that he lived well on earth and he was welcomed in the land of ancestors. In addition to the above, it is instructive to note that for the practitioners of African Religion, the pronouncement of the human agents is taken as God's

and therefore they obey these pronouncements and observe all the punishments prescribed from the beginning to the latter without necessarily being cajoled into doing so. This, the Africans do because of the need to make amends and maintain a cordial relationship with man and nature.

As Anyacho (2004: 275) notes with references to the preceding lines, man is the prime of God's creation. Because of this, the treatment or acts that will help to stabilise the human society is rewarded by both man and the gods. This argument seriously put in doubt, the claim by Aghamelu (2005:156) that it is fear that makes Africans accept and adhere strictly and most times, blindly to certain traditions irrespective of the pains they experience in the course of keeping such traditions.

However, even if her claim is true, is it not fear of the unknown that makes people conform to societal norms? The deterrent theory of punishment earlier discussed makes allusion to this fact. According to this theory, punishment is meant to frighten other people in order to prevent them from committing crimes/evil (Kajo, 2007:72). If this be the case, it means that the phenomenon is not only applicable to African societies or African Religion alone. Incidentally, is it not the same fear of punishment in the afterlife that Christians and Muslims alike try to live morally good lives, doing good so as to gain heaven and avoid the pains of hell fire where Jesus foretold there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 22: 14).

From the foregone, Africans are called upon to always try to see 'something good/positive' in the religion and cultures of Africa and stop viewing African cultures from the lenses of the west. It is not everything that is bad/evil about African Religion and culture. The Jews for instance did not condemn Judaism as a bad religion just because God asked Hosea the prophet to marry a prostitute to buttress the kind of love he had for the chosen race (cf Hosea 1:ff). Similarly, when God punished *Achan* for his sin which brought about the defeat of the Jews in war by casting the image of God in the shadow of disrepute and his whole family exterminated, the Jews did not see this "Godian" action wicked and uncivilised; but interpreted it as the repercussion and punishment for sin and evil not condoned by God (cf. Josh.7and 8).

Rather, the incidence helped in enforcing the authority of Yahweh over his chosen ones. Also, amidst the condemnation of the human agents and its spontaneous punishment of evil being harsh or wicked; was the African society not well ordered and better and the adherents of African Religion more careful? Can this be said to be said of the contemporary society which claims to be civilised and the rights of the citizens enshrined in constitutions? In conclusion therefore, it is unthinkable to contemplate that evil would be eradicated completely from human societies; however, if everyone tries to be faithful in their own ways, the world would be a better place for humans to live in. And for those who hold the erroneous view that the human agents have no role in the punishment of evil, they should have a re-think because it belongs to the natural and supernatural order that the evil should be eliminated so that the good can prevail. There is a tendency for the evil to destroy the good and so, even in the natural order, there is need of efforts to get rid of evil and

wickedness (*God's word*, 28ᵗʰ July, 2022). As human agents try to rid society of evil, it is hoped that at the close of age, God the supreme spirit himself will reward the righteous and punish the wicked be they of African, Islamic, Christianity, Judaism or Asian religious persuasions.

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