# "How Can the Untutored Africans Conceive God?" A Reassessment of Lévy-Bruhl's Enquiry in the Light of African Lived Religion

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## ABSTRACT

Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's question, "How can the untutored Africans conceive God?", emerged within an early anthropological context in which European intellectual categories frequently served as standards for evaluating the religious and intellectual capacities of non-Western peoples. His theory of "primitive mentality" associated certain forms of religious thought with a mode of consciousness described as pre-logical and insufficiently differentiated from the social and natural worlds (Lévy-Bruhl, 1926, 1928). This study reassesses the assumptions underlying this enquiry through selected Igbo and Yoruba religious expressions, with particular attention to naming systems, festivals, rites associated with birth and death, and other forms of communal religious life. The study is qualitative, interpretative, and theoretical, and relies on established anthropological, philosophical, religious, and theological literature. Phenomenology is employed primarily as a philosophical and interpretative framework rather than as an empirical research methodology. It directs attention to religious consciousness as lived, embodied, communal, and expressed through concrete practices (Gschwandtner, 2019; McKenzie, 1987). The study argues that selected Igbo and Yoruba religious expressions disclose coherent conceptions of God that cannot be adequately evaluated through categories that identify formal education or abstract philosophical reasoning as the exclusive conditions for meaningful religious knowledge (Idowu, 1962, 1973; Mbiti, 1990; Metuh, 1987). The paper therefore challenges the epistemological assumptions underlying Lévy-Bruhl's enquiry while acknowledging the historical development and qualifications of his position. It concludes that African lived religion provides an important source for understanding indigenous conceptions of God and offers significant resources for African Christian theology.

**Keywords:** African Religious Thought, Lévy-Bruhl, God-concept, Lived Religion, Phenomenology, Igbo Religion, Yoruba Religion, African Theology

## INTRODUCTION

Early encounters between Western anthropology and African religious traditions developed within an intellectual environment strongly influenced by evolutionary theories of culture. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, African societies were frequently interpreted through theories that arranged cultures according to assumed stages of intellectual and social development. Religious practices that differed from European philosophical and Christian categories were therefore often evaluated through external conceptual frameworks (Olupona, 2014; Ranger, 1999).

Lucien Lévy-Bruhl occupies an important place in this intellectual history. His writings on what he called "primitive mentality" sought to describe forms of thought that he associated with societies outside the Western intellectual tradition. In How Natives Think, he discussed collective representations, mystical participation, and what he termed "prelogical mentality" (Lévy-Bruhl, 1926). His earlier work, La mentalité primitive, developed related arguments concerning the distinctive character of what he called primitive thought (Lévy-Bruhl, 1922).

Lévy-Bruhl's position requires historical precision. His thought was not completely static, and his later writings introduced qualifications to some of the stronger implications of his earlier formulations. His Carnets, published posthumously in 1949, reveal continuing reflection on participation, contradiction, causality, and the relationship between mystical experience and logical requirements (Lévy-Bruhl, 1949). A responsible reassessment should therefore distinguish between Lévy-Bruhl's original formulations and later simplified representations of his position.

The question, "How can the untutored Africans conceive God?", raises a philosophical problem beyond the immediate question of African belief in God. It raises the prior question of what qualifies as genuine religious knowledge. If knowledge of God is recognized only when expressed through formal theological education, systematic philosophy, or abstract conceptual reasoning, forms of religious consciousness expressed through ritual, language, communal life, moral practice, and interpretations of existence risk being classified as intellectually inadequate.

African scholars of religion have challenged such approaches by demonstrating the intellectual coherence of indigenous religious worldviews. Idowu's study of Yoruba religion presents a structured account of Olódùmarè, divinity, human existence, ritual, and the religious order (Idowu, 1962, 1973). Mbiti (1990) emphasizes the close relationship among religion, community, time, personhood, and existence in African religious thought. Metuh (1987) similarly demonstrates both common features and significant differences among African religious traditions, while warning against treating African religions as a single homogeneous system.

Recent scholarship also emphasizes the diversity of African religious traditions and the need to study them within their particular cultural and historical contexts (Olupona, 2014). This methodological caution is important for the present study because its substantive illustrations come primarily from selected Igbo and Yoruba contexts.

The study therefore reassesses Lévy-Bruhl's problem through selected Igbo and Yoruba religious expressions. It does not claim that these traditions represent all African religious systems. Rather, they provide specific cultural contexts through which the broader philosophical question concerning African religious consciousness is examined.

Naming practices, festivals, birth, death, and other religious expressions are considered as forms through which communities interpret existence and articulate relationships with the divine. The central argument is phenomenological. Religious consciousness should be examined as it is lived and expressed within concrete human existence.

The relevant question is therefore not simply whether a religious community possesses a formal philosophical definition of God. It is also how God is encountered, named, acknowledged, invoked, remembered, and related to within the structures of everyday life.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite sustained criticism of colonial and evolutionary approaches to African religion, assumptions inherited from early anthropology continue to influence discussions of African religious thought. Lévy-Bruhl's work provides an important historical case because his concept of primitive mentality raised questions about the intellectual character of religious thought outside Western philosophical traditions (Lévy-Bruhl, 1926).

The problem addressed in this study is epistemological. It concerns the standards by which African religious consciousness has been evaluated. The absence of formal philosophical terminology does not necessarily indicate the absence of conceptual thought. Religious communities express ideas about God, human existence, morality, community, suffering, death, and transcendence through language, ritual, social relationships, symbols, and interpretations of significant events (Idowu, 1973; Mbiti, 1990; Metuh, 1987).

The problem becomes particularly important when external categories transform difference into deficiency. Olupona (2014) observes the historical tendency to treat African religion as an object defined through Western categories rather than as a religious subject requiring interpretation within its own cultural contexts. Similarly, Dias (2013) argues that the study of Yoruba religion has often been affected by methodological Eurocentrism and by categories that separate "religion" from "magic" according to Western conceptual assumptions.

The present study therefore asks whether African religious consciousness should be judged primarily accordin-

g to external standards of formal rationality. The selected Igbo and Yoruba materials provide specific contexts for examining this question.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study is guided by the following questions:

1. What anthropological and epistemological assumptions underlie Lévy-Bruhl's enquiry concerning African conceptions of God?
2. How do selected Igbo and Yoruba religious expressions communicate conceptions of God within lived experience?
3. How do naming practices, festivals, and rites associated with birth and death communicate religious and theological meaning within the selected contexts?
4. What does a phenomenological interpretation of these religious expressions reveal about the relationship between God, human existence, and community?
5. What implications does this understanding of lived religion have for African Christian theology?

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are to:

1. Examine Lévy-Bruhl's enquiry within its historical and anthropological context.
2. Clarify the epistemological assumptions involved in the distinction between "tutored" and "untutored" religious consciousness.
3. Explain phenomenology as a philosophical and interpretative framework for examining lived religious experience.
4. Examine selected Igbo and Yoruba religious expressions as forms of religious consciousness.
5. Analyse the theological meanings expressed through naming, festivals, birth, death, and communal religious practices.
6. Consider the implications of lived indigenous religious consciousness for African Christian theology.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study contributes to African Religious Thought by revisiting an important question in the history of the anthropology of religion. Rather than evaluating African religious consciousness solely according to external philosophical categories, it examines how religious meaning emerges within concrete cultural and communal practices.

The study is also relevant to African theology. Christianity developed within African societies that already possessed religious vocabularies, cosmologies, moral systems, ritual practices, and understandings of divine reality. African Christian theology therefore requires serious engagement with indigenous religious categories rather than their dismissal as intellectually inadequate (Idowu, 1973; Mbiti, 1990; Shorter, 1975).

The study further contributes to philosophical discussions of religious knowledge. It questions the assumption that formal education and abstract conceptual reasoning constitute the only legitimate forms through which human beings encounter and understand God.

## SCOPE AND DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The study focuses on selected religious expressions within Igbo and Yoruba contexts. These contexts are used

as specific cases for examining the broader philosophical problem raised by Lévy-Bruhl.

The study does not attempt to provide an exhaustive account of African Traditional Religions. Africa contains extensive linguistic, cultural, historical, and religious diversity, and no two traditions should be assumed to possess identical conceptions of God, ritual, personhood, or the afterlife (Olupona, 2014).

The substantive illustrations in this study are therefore restricted primarily to selected Igbo and Yoruba materials. These include personal names, festivals, rites associated with birth and death, communal religious activities, and conceptions of divine agency.

The expression "African religious consciousness" is used at a broader philosophical level to identify the problem under investigation. The empirical and illustrative claims, however, remain limited to the Igbo and Yoruba contexts examined.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is qualitative, interpretative, and library-based. It does not present original ethnographic data, interviews, questionnaires, or participant observation. Its conclusions therefore do not constitute comprehensive empirical claims about all African religious traditions.

The diversity of African societies also makes generalization problematic. The study addresses this limitation by restricting its substantive illustrations primarily to selected Igbo and Yoruba contexts.

The reliance on established literature means that the analysis is dependent upon the conceptual frameworks and cultural interpretations contained in the sources consulted. The purpose is therefore philosophical and interpretative rather than ethnographically exhaustive.

## METHODOLOGY AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

### Research Approach

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretative, and theoretical approach based primarily on established anthropological, philosophical, religious, and theological literature.

Phenomenology is employed primarily as a philosophical and interpretative framework rather than as an empirical research methodology. This distinction responds directly to the methodological issue raised by the study. The research does not involve phenomenological interviews, participant observation, or the reduction and analysis of interview transcripts.

Phenomenology has several meanings within the study of religion. It has been used to identify approaches concerned with the structures of religious phenomena, philosophical phenomenology influenced by Husserl, and approaches concerned specifically with religious experience (Gschwandtner, 2019). The present study uses phenomenology in the interpretative sense.

The purpose is to attend to religious experience as it appears through concrete practices and expressions. The approach therefore asks what religious practices disclose about the way people understand God, human existence, community, morality, death, and transcendence.

### Phenomenology and Lived Religion

A phenomenological approach begins with attention to experience and meaning rather than imposing an external conceptual hierarchy upon the phenomenon under investigation. In religious studies, phenomenological approaches have sought to describe and interpret religious phenomena in terms of sacred time, sacred space, ritual action, religious language, community, divine concepts, and religious experience (Gschwandtner, 2019).

McKenzie's (1987) phenomenological interpretation of Yoruba religion is particularly relevant to this study because it demonstrates how phenomenological categories may be applied to Yoruba religious materials. His analysis considers religious phenomena, concepts of deity, ritual, sacred action, community, and religious experience.

The concept of lived religion complements this approach by directing attention to religion as practiced within ordinary life. Religious consciousness is therefore examined through concrete expressions rather than treated exclusively as a formal system of propositions.

The analysis proceeds through four related movements:

1. Identification of the concrete religious expression.
2. Examination of the meaning attributed to the expression within its cultural context.
3. Interpretation of the religious consciousness disclosed through the practice.
4. Consideration of the implications of this consciousness for conceptions of God, human existence, community, and theology.

This framework prevents religious practices from being reduced to isolated customs. It also avoids equating the absence of formal philosophical education with the absence of rational or meaningful religious thought.

## LÉVY-BRUHL AND THE PROBLEM OF AFRICAN RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS

Lévy-Bruhl's How Natives Think provides a primary source for understanding the historical assumptions behind the problem addressed in this study. He described what he called the "primitive mentality" and discussed collective representations, participation, and forms of thought he characterized as prelogical (Lévy-Bruhl, 1926).

The concept of participation occupies a central position in his analysis. Lévy-Bruhl sought to describe relationships among persons, objects, events, and spiritual realities that, in his interpretation, did not conform to the logical structures associated with Western thought (Lévy-Bruhl, 1926).

This framework has important epistemological consequences. When a form of religious consciousness is classified as "pre-logical," the classification risks establishing a hierarchy among forms of human cognition. The question therefore extends beyond whether African communities possess beliefs about God. It concerns whether their ways of expressing and experiencing those beliefs qualify as legitimate forms of knowledge.

Lévy-Bruhl's work should nevertheless be treated historically rather than as a static body of thought. His later writings reveal continuing reflection on the relationship between participation, experience, causality, contradiction, and logical requirements (Lévy-Bruhl, 1949). His later reflections therefore complicate a simplistic reading of his earlier theory.

The present study does not claim that Lévy-Bruhl simply denied African belief in God. It challenges the epistemological assumptions involved in treating formal abstraction as the necessary standard for determining whether religious consciousness is intellectually meaningful.

## LIVED RELIGION AND THE CONCEPTION OF GOD

The concept of lived religion provides an appropriate interpretative complement to phenomenology. Religion is expressed not only through formal doctrines and institutional structures but also through ordinary practices, relationships, symbols, language, rituals, and interpretations of significant events.

African religious traditions display considerable diversity, yet scholars have repeatedly emphasized the close relationship between religion and everyday existence (Mbiti, 1990; Metuh, 1987; Olupona, 2014).

Within the selected Igbo and Yoruba contexts, religious meanings appear through personal names, festivals,

life-cycle rituals, communal relationships, and interpretations of significant events. These expressions communicate understandings of divine agency, human dependence, community, morality, and the order of existence.

This does not mean that every cultural practice is automatically theological. Nor does it imply that all members of an Igbo or Yoruba community interpret religious practices in precisely the same manner. The argument is narrower. These practices provide culturally established forms through which religious consciousness is expressed and communities interpret their relationship with God.

## SELECTED IGBO AND YORUBA EXPRESSIONS OF GOD-CONSCIOUSNESS

### Naming Practices

Personal names provide an important example of the relationship between religious consciousness and ordinary life.

Among the Igbo, names such as Chukwuemeka, Chibuzo, and Nkechinyere express religious interpretations of human existence. Chukwuemeka communicates recognition of divine action. Chibuzo expresses dependence upon divine guidance, while Nkechinyere interprets the child as a gift received from God.

Naming practices are important because names operate within social and religious systems of meaning. Metuh (1987) identifies names and concepts of God as significant areas for understanding African religious thought. The religious meaning of a name therefore extends beyond its linguistic form.

Similar religious meanings appear in Yoruba naming practices. Yoruba religious thought has historically connected personal identity, destiny, divine agency, and the moral ordering of life (Idowu, 1962; McKenzie, 1987).

From a phenomenological perspective, the importance of these names lies in the manner in which religious meaning enters personal identity and everyday language. God is not presented only as an abstract metaphysical concept. Divine agency becomes part of how individuals and communities interpret events, relationships, hopes, and experiences.

The examples should not be generalized to every Igbo or Yoruba community. Their significance lies in demonstrating how theological meaning may be embodied in ordinary linguistic and social practices.

### Festivals and Communal Religious Life

Festivals provide another context in which religious consciousness becomes visible. African religious traditions frequently express religious meaning through festivals, rituals, sacred times, communal performances, and acts of thanksgiving (Olupona, 2014).

In selected Igbo contexts, agricultural celebrations such as the New Yam Festival combine thanksgiving, communal participation, ritual performance, and recognition of dependence upon the sources of life. Such practices demonstrate the relationship between religious consciousness and communal existence.

The phenomenological significance of the festival lies in its enacted character. Religious meaning is not confined to an isolated intellectual proposition. It is embodied in collective participation.

This observation does not establish that all African festivals possess the same theological meaning. Rather, it demonstrates why ritual practices require interpretation within their particular cultural contexts.

### Birth and the Interpretation of Human Existence

Birth provides another context for examining lived religious consciousness. Within selected African contexts,

the arrival of a child may be interpreted through concepts of divine blessing, family continuity, community, and human existence.

African religious scholarship has repeatedly emphasized the importance of life-cycle events in the organization of religious meaning (Mbiti, 1990; Metuh, 1987; Olupona, 2014).

A phenomenological reading asks what such interpretations reveal about the experience of human life. The child is understood not merely as a biological occurrence but as an event incorporated into a network of religious, familial, and communal meanings.

The diversity of African societies requires caution. Practices and interpretations differ according to community, historical period, social circumstance, and religious affiliation. Birth is therefore treated here as an illustrative context rather than evidence of a uniform African belief system.

**Death, Continuity, and the Transcendent Order**

Death provides another important context for examining religious consciousness. Funeral practices and remembrance disclose ideas concerning the relationship between the living, the dead, community, and transcendence.

Mbiti (1990) emphasizes the significance of the living and the departed within African religious conceptions of existence. Metuh (1987) likewise treats the living dead, ancestral relations, and the afterlife as important components of African religious thought.

Within selected traditional contexts, ancestors occupy an important position within the relationship between visible and invisible dimensions of existence. Such beliefs should not be reduced to the proposition that ancestors replace God. Yoruba and other African religious systems often distinguish the Supreme Being from other divine or spiritual beings within a broader religious order (Idowu, 1962, 1973; McKenzie, 1987).

From a phenomenological perspective, death reveals how a community interprets the meaning and limits of human existence. Funeral practices therefore communicate assumptions concerning personhood, community, memory, continuity, and transcendence.

## REASSESSING LÉVY-BRUHL THROUGH LIVED RELIGION

The selected Igbo and Yoruba materials provide a basis for reassessing the epistemological assumptions associated with Lévy-Bruhl.

First, religious knowledge does not require formal theological education before it becomes meaningful. A person may lack formal training in philosophy or theology and still express a coherent understanding of divine agency through language, ritual, moral life, and communal practice (Idowu, 1973; Mbiti, 1990).

Second, religious consciousness does not necessarily appear in the form of systematic philosophical propositions. A personal name, festival, funeral practice, or interpretation of birth may communicate a conception of God without presenting it as a formal philosophical argument.

Third, the distinction between abstract thought and lived experience should not automatically become a distinction between rational and irrational consciousness. Religious practices may contain conceptual assumptions even when those assumptions remain embedded in ritual and communal life.

Fourth, religious consciousness is relational. Conceptions of God emerge in relation to human beings, family, community, nature, morality, life, death, and the wider order of existence (Idowu, 1962; Mbiti, 1990; Metuh, 1987).

The phenomenological perspective therefore changes the question being asked. Instead of beginning with the

assumption that religious consciousness must conform to a predetermined model of rationality, it begins by examining how religious meaning is constituted within lived experience.

The selected Yoruba material is particularly useful here. McKenzie (1987) demonstrates that Yoruba religion admits phenomenological analysis through categories such as sacred objects, sacred space, sacred time, sacred action, religious concepts, and religious experience. Harvey (2012) similarly demonstrates the usefulness of phenomenological analysis for examining indigenous Yoruba grammars of knowing.

The result is a different understanding of the relationship between rationality and religious experience. Religious consciousness need not imitate Western philosophical discourse to possess intellectual significance. Its conceptual content may be expressed through practices, narratives, names, ritual actions, social obligations, and interpretations of existence.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

The reassessment has implications for African Christian theology. Christianity encountered societies with established religious vocabularies, cosmologies, moral systems, and understandings of God, humanity, community, life, and death. African Christian theology therefore developed in dialogue, tension, and sometimes conflict with indigenous religious traditions (Shorter, 1975).

Idowu (1973) and Mbiti (1990) demonstrate the importance of indigenous religious categories for understanding African approaches to Christian theology. Such engagement does not require the uncritical incorporation of traditional beliefs into Christianity. Rather, it requires serious consideration of the cultural categories through which African Christians understand Christian doctrines.

This issue is particularly important for inculturation. If African religious consciousness is dismissed in advance as intellectually deficient, theological engagement risks reproducing the epistemological hierarchy inherited from colonial anthropology. A more adequate theological approach begins with serious attention to the meanings through which African communities have historically interpreted their existence.

The implications extend to the theological understanding of God. African Christian theology has repeatedly addressed the question of how Christian discourse about God relates to indigenous conceptions of divine reality. The Yoruba concept of Olódùmarè, for example, demonstrates that reflection on supreme divine reality existed within Yoruba religious thought before the arrival of Christianity (Idowu, 1962).

Similarly, studies of Igbo religious thought demonstrate the importance of examining indigenous categories of God, creation, divinity, human existence, ritual, and moral order within their own conceptual contexts (Metuh, 1987; Ojimba & Chidubem, 2022).

African Christian theology therefore benefits from treating indigenous religious consciousness as an important theological interlocutor. Such engagement requires critical discernment, historical awareness, and intellectual respect.

## CONCLUSION

Lévy-Bruhl's question, "How can the untutored Africans conceive God?", raises a significant historical and philosophical problem concerning the standards by which religious knowledge is recognized. His earlier discussions of primitive mentality provide an important example of an anthropological framework through which non-Western religious consciousness was interpreted in relation to European assumptions about rationality (Lévy-Bruhl, 1926).

This study has not attempted to speak exhaustively for all African religious traditions. Its substantive analysis has focused on selected Igbo and Yoruba contexts. Within these contexts, naming practices, festivals, birth, death, and communal religious expressions disclose ways in which God and the transcendent order are interpreted within ordinary existence.

The phenomenological framework employed here treats these expressions as manifestations of lived religious consciousness. It does not assume that meaningful knowledge of God must first be expressed through formal theological education or abstract philosophical reasoning. Nor does it equate non-formal religious thought with irrationality.

The reassessment therefore concerns the epistemological framework through which African religious consciousness is interpreted. The selected materials indicate that religious knowledge may be embodied in language, ritual, communal relationships, life-cycle practices, and interpretations of human existence. Such knowledge possesses conceptual significance even when it is not formulated as a formal philosophical system (Idowu, 1962, 1973; Mbiti, 1990; Metuh, 1987).

A more adequate study of African religious consciousness must consequently attend to religion as lived experience. In the selected Igbo and Yoruba contexts examined here, conceptions of God emerge through concrete realities of human existence. This provides a basis for reassessing the assumptions behind Lévy-Bruhl's enquiry and for recognizing indigenous religious consciousness as a significant resource for African Religious Thought and African Christian theology.

The question, therefore, should not be whether the "untutored" African is capable of conceiving God. The more appropriate question is how particular African communities have encountered, named, interpreted, and lived their understanding of God. Once the question is framed in this way, African religious consciousness becomes a legitimate subject of philosophical and theological interpretation rather than an object to be measured against an externally imposed hierarchy of rationality.

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