

## A THEMATIC COMPARISON BETWEEN FOUR AFRICAN SCHOLARS: IDOWU, MBITI, OKOT p'BITEK & APPIAH

What do they tell us about the existence of 'truth' and a 'High God', and why is their work significant?

by Louise Muller

*ABSTRACT.* The author looks at two themes in the writings of four African scholars: E. Bolaji Idowu, John Mbiti, Okot p'Bitek and Kwame Appiah. She surveys their ideas about the existence of truth and of a High God. For each theme, she outlines the significance of each author's work. In the conclusion the coherence between both themes is shown with the help of two varieties of philosophical positions and aesthetic styles, notably: modernism and postmodernism. She shows why Idowu and Mbiti should be categorized as modernist. She argues that Okot p'Bitek's view of God-as-dead shows him to be a modernist and why his deconstruction of the work of previous scholars also makes him a postmodernist *avant la lettre*. Finally, she argues that Appiah's postmodern vision on the non-existence of one single truth has been conducive to his vision on identity as a bricolage of traditional and modern elements of culture.

*KEY WORDS.* African religion, Appiah (Kwame), discourse, High God, Idowu (Bolaji), Mbiti (John), modernism, Okot p'Bitek, postmodernism, truth

### *Introduction*

In this essay I will look at two themes in the writings of four African scholars: E. Bolaji Idowu, John Mbiti, Okot p'Bitek and Kwame Appiah. I will survey their ideas about the existence of truth and of a Highest God. For each theme, I will outline the significance of each author's work. In the conclusion the coherence between both themes will be shown with the help of two varieties of philosophical positions and aesthetic styles, notably: modernism and postmodernism.

In order to understand these scholars and their work the following short introduction to these positions might be helpful.

Modernism is a position that is rooted in the Enlightenment and its belief in reason. Some Modernist scholars are looking for *absolute knowledge* in science. They believe that science is objective, universal and rational. Early Enlightenment ideals involved rational enquiry as the guiding principle for all knowledge, and the belief that only progress in intellectual method could bring about a world of order, security and social understanding. Scholars associated with this tradition include the philosophers Kant, Hegel and Voltaire. The flipside to this position is that, in believing that their values should be universally applied, Enlightenment thinkers tended to see Europe as the most enlightened and civilized part of the world. Hegel thought it was allowed morally to colonize non-Western people (Ward 2003: 9-11).

Postmodernism is a position that has developed since the 1950s. Postmodernism 'truth' only exists in relation to specific discourses, in a way that has antecedents in the relativistic truth theories of Ancient Greek and Roman rhetorical approaches, as found in the works of Protagoras, Aristotle, and Cicero).<sup>1</sup> For the postmodern French philosopher Lyotard this meant that scientific truth-claims could only be legitimated by reference to the scientific specific language game in which they were made (Lyotard 1987). Knowledge is never neutral and its claims serve specific interests. It also means that no account of historical reality is free of narrative. Because the past cannot be reconstructed as it 'really' happened, the only thing that can be done is telling stories about it (Ward 2003: 182).

### *Truth*

One of the themes that is dealt with in the readings of the four mentioned African writers is 'truth'. For the Nigerian writer Idowu this meant that in the used methodology scholars should look at the social reality of indigenous

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Salazar, P.-J., Osha, S., & van Binsbergen, W., eds., *Truth in Politics: Rhetorical Approaches to Democratic Deliberation in Africa and beyond*, special issue of *QUEST: An African Journal of Philosophy*, Volume XVI (2002). My use the label 'postmodern' to denote a twentieth-century CE discourse-specific approach to truth, allows me to attach that label to various thinkers who, chronologically, would rather be considered postmodernists *avant la lettre*, such as Okot p'Bitek.

religions without the prejudices that come with theories about it. Idowu’s objection against theories was that they describe indigenous religions as if they are well-structured and completely coherent and consistent systems of belief.<sup>2</sup> In his viewpoint such a reflection upon the belief system of the ethnic group he studied and belonged to was false. He thought, the ideas of the spiritual world of the Yoruba-an ethnic group in Western Nigeria-were not consistent, because they were the product of a society with an oral tradition (Idowu 1962: 18-29). Illiterate societies were characterized by a lot of inconsistencies, since the necessity of consistency in these societies was missing. In text culture every inconsistency is immediately visible. Though, in oral cultures the specific context in which an utterance is used is more important than its eternal consistency. Idowu discovered a lot of inconsistencies in the Yoruba belief. He found for example different versions in their myth of origin of their ideas about a High God (Olodumare). In the earliest version it was Orisa-nla who got the instruction of Olodumare to create the solid earth. In the second version it was Oduduwa. The last version was a conflation between both: it was Orisa-nla who got the commission from Olodumare to create the world, but through an accident, he forfeited the privilege to Oduduwa, who thus became the actual creator of the solid earth. Idowu looked for these different versions because he thought that there could not be one version of an oral story that might be considered as truth. Because in an oral tradition ideas are not written down, stories can change easily while being told from parents to their children for many generations. Besides, a society changes which makes it is more or less attractive to adopt one version of a story and reject another. Or as what happened in the case of the Yoruba, to combine two myths of origin and accept the collective story as truth (Idowu 1962: 18-29). These arguments are common in the study of oral history. However, Idowu did not mention the most important argument, namely that a society is a not monolith, and different sections (classes, gen-

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of consistency fits into the modernist mechanical worldview. For instance, in a factory the movements of workers have to be consistent in order to make machines. Some modernist scholars believe in an unchangeably consistent religious system. See: Boyer, Pascal, 2001. *Religions explained: The human instincts that fashion Gods, spirits and ancestors*, London: Random House. Idowu accepts that the religious belief system of the Yoruba has changed over time, and thus he does not believe in any absolute consistency of that belief system.

ders, age groups) have different interests, which are selectively suited by various versions of the available mythical material. Idowu did not put any effort in detecting different field of cultural orientation in the Yoruba society, which in these days would be unacceptable. For Idowu ‘truth’ meant studying the different versions of oral tradition in Yoruba belief, irrespective of the social contexts in which they were created. The purpose of his linguistic-anthropological study was to show how the religious belief system of the Yoruba really was. Anyhow, Idowu studied the Yoruba religion from a Christian liberal theological point of view. He believed that God had revealed himself to all people. Truth lay in the fact that if he would use the right methodology and wait patiently, God’s revelation would show itself to the Yoruba (Idowu 1962: 1-11).

For the Kenyan theologian Mbiti, ‘truth’ was also connected to the Christian belief. Christianity was part of African religions, since it was already present before the colonization of Africa (Bediako 1992: 367). Christian elements were part of the essence of African religions. Mbiti’s truth lay in looking for the complete essence of these religions. His theory fitted well with the ideas of the adherences of Pan-Africanism: a general term for various movements in Africa that have as their common goal the unity of Africans and the elimination of colonialism and white supremacy from the continent (Amate 1987). Pan-Africans thought that there were some characteristics of the African race that distinguished it from other races. One of the essential elements of this race was that religiously Africans were bound together. For that reason they should have one system of belief (Mbiti 1969: 1).<sup>3</sup>

Okot p’Bitek (1931-1982), the Ugandan poet and scholar, did not accept such a system as truth. As a postmodernist, he thought that in the deconstruction of the ideas of earlier scholars of religion, such as Idowu and Mbiti, various truths about these religions would show themselves. In order to criticize the work of other scholars Okot p’Bitek divided their studies in three related categories:

- a. The Christian apologists mounting a counter-attack on the eight-

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<sup>3</sup> By contrast to Parrinder, Mbiti thought that there were minor cultural variations within this system.

eenth and twentieth centuries ‘non-believers’.

- b. African nationalists fighting a defensive battle against the vicious onslaught on African cultures by Western scholarship: and
- c. The missionaries staging what they called “a dialogue with animism.”

I will first explore his second category: the African Nationalists. Okot p’Bitek emphasized that the work of these nationalists, such as for example Leopold Senghor, was written as a reaction on studies on Africa in Western scholarship. Senghor praised the black sensibility as opposed to the white reason as an element of the African race to be proud of. Okot p’Bitek criticizes the search for sensible elements in African indigenous religions as opposed to Christianity. He thought that it did not tell anything about African religions itself and was not more than a mirror of European societies and their religions. It showed Westerners how their societies were not, but did not show the truth about African societies and religions (Okot p’Bitek 1990: 40-52).

Under point (c) and further on in his book, Okot p’Bitek scrutinized concepts used by Western scholars of religion such as ‘animism’, which was associated with primitivism. Animism or the belief in spiritual beings was regarded with illusions which were the product of primitive minds. Okot p’Bitek saw in ‘animism’ a conceptual falsehood that originated from the anthropological tradition. In his view the anthropological discipline which originates from 1839 came into existence because it could provide an excuse for the submission of other people. In the anthropological way of reasoning it was allowed to subject African people, since they needed help in their religious development, among other things.

The Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Appiah shared Okot p’Bitek’s absence in the belief of one truth. Life is chaotic and decentred and there is no religious doctrine in African religions, which tells Africans how to live a religious life. Appiah dismissed the Pan-African idea of essentialism, which is based on the presumption that all Africans can be characterized by elements that are unique to the African race, including a common religion. He called the way of reasoning of the Black Nationalists of the 1960’s a form of intrinsic racism. An intrinsic racist distinguishes morally between different races because they hold that each race has a different moral status, apart

from the moral characteristics included in its racial essence. Intrinsic racism is based on racial solidarity on something like family feeling, promoting mutual help within a race. Yet the “family model” ultimately fails as a justification for intrinsic racism. The family is the unit through which we live what is most intimate; it is the center of private life. The importance of family lies not in biological kinship but social relatedness, i.e. the shared experiences, attitudes, knowledge and belief, and the mutual investments of time in each other that normally occurs in a family. Racial groups, Appiah says, are far too large and the shared experiences too diffuse for these groups to be considered on the model of the family (Appiah 1992: 480-82).

Appiah called the idea of intrinsic racism thus a failure. Africans are not bound to a common race, nor a common language, culture or religion and do not recognize themselves in any other African culture but their own. He believed that instead there are many African religions and identities. The truth lies in studying African religions and identities free from the African colonial inheritance. Appiah felt that Africans should not walk away from their colonial history. Though, they should liberate themselves from the image that was given to them by the Europeans and focus on the meaning of African identity and religion nowadays. He emphasized that for a long time African identity had grown around falsehoods, such as race, a common historical experience and metaphysics. Although identity is always based on invention of falsehoods, some of them are more destructive than constructive. In his search for truth Appiah was looking for more constructive falsehoods to build identity upon (Appiah 1992: 174).

## 1.2. Significance

Idowu studied the Yoruba religion without judging it as being barbaric, childish or non-existent such as was common in Western scholarship for many centuries. He did not approach the Yoruba from the nineteenth century theory of evolution, in which it was quoted that the Yoruba and other Africans were superstitious and had not yet reached the level of society in which a belief system could develop. Idowu’s methodology was revolutionary in the sense that he described the Yoruba from the inside, as well as his tools allowed him. He wanted to study them as subjects equal to himself, instead

of looking at them as objects that should be investigated from a distance (Idowu 1962: 1-11).

His work is as an interesting historical document of the knowledge production on African religions in the 1970s. However, nowadays his methodology would have been unacceptable. First of all Idowu had a theological instead of a scientific starting point. He wanted to study the revelation of God amongst the Yoruba and was looking for the (High) God among them. In that sense, he was prejudiced, since he presumed such a (Highest) God existed. Idowu saw in the Yoruba belief prove for God’s universal divine revelation and was very willing to find their God. Anyhow, the enquiry if God exists and what his local name will be is not an academic question. Secondly, Idowu wrote that he investigated the Yoruba belief from the inside but did not give any insight in his sources. It seems his information on the Yoruba is primarily based on linguistic sources, as he describes the etymology of concepts such as the High God (Olodumare). It is namely not clear if he interviewed the Yoruba themselves or only used the knowledge he had gathered about this belief by listening to stories of the elders in his village during his youth. That is, he says he knows what the Yoruba belief is, since he is a Yoruba believer himself (Idowu 1962: 11).

Idowu’s work is thus both revolutionary and prejudiced. However, I think there should not be too much emphasis put on his prejudices, since in comparison with the ways in which African religions have been studied in Western scholarship for many centuries he was relatively little prejudiced. This becomes clear if we compare his work with for example Voltaire’s *Philosophy of history*, 1766, in which the French philosopher wrote:

‘The majority of mankind were for a long time in a state of imbecility, and that, perhaps the most imbecile of all were those who wanted to discover a signification in these absurd fables, and ingrained reason upon folly’ (Voltaire 1766).

From this background I feel it would be anachronistic to value too negatively the methodology Idowu used. We cannot impose the methodological ideas of later scholars upon the work of their scientific predecessors.

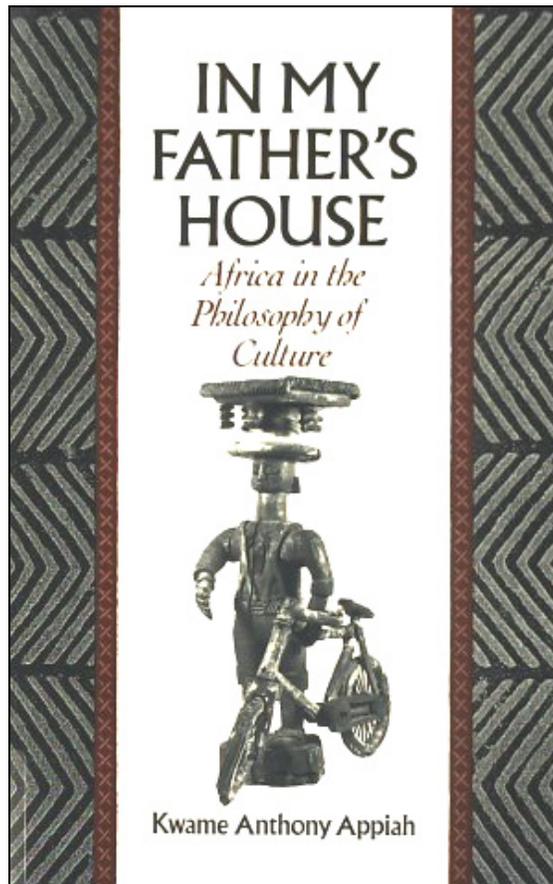
The same remark can be made for the point of departure of Mbiti. As a theologian, he was looking for the essence of African religions. This essence showed itself by comparing African religions with Christianity. By arguing that Christian elements were part of indigenous African beliefs, he argued

against the evolutionary idea that African belief would be primitive or non-existent. For this reason Okot p'Bitek assigned Mbiti to the category of African nationalists, who were fighting a defensive battle against the vicious onslaught of Western scholarship on African cultures. However, given the background of ways of thinking about African religions, I think such a battle was necessary and Mbiti's work was relatively little prejudiced. Therefore, even after Okot p'Bitek's severe criticism on the work of both Idowu and Mbiti, I think my judgment about the significance of their work should be positive.

With their work Idowu and Mbiti gave an alternative way of thinking to the ideas of the conservative theologians, who thought that the Christian belief was the only acceptable religion. Mbiti and Idowu were liberal theologians who believed in the revelation of God in Africa and therefore in the great value of African religions. However, some critical points on the work of Mbiti remain. In my opinion it is a disadvantage that Mbiti's description of African beliefs is more or less abstracted from its cultural and historical context. It looks as if Mbiti has first thought out, from first principles, a model of African religions, only later to use the fieldwork of other scholars of African religions in order to prove that his model was an adequate reflection on the social reality. I think that if he had worked the other way round and had collected more data himself, his research results would have had more value.

The significance of Okot p'Bitek's work in relation to truth is that he showed the falsehoods in the way of thinking of his forerunners on African religions in Western scholarship. However, Okot p'Bitek himself was similarly 'guilty' of a falsehood in his efforts to de-Hellenise African religions (Van Rinsum 2001: 90). His opinion on religion was that it was a social phenomenon. It was a phenomenon of the mind that was used to regulate social intercourse. However, in his effort to secularize African religions he was westernizing them as well. He said that traditional Africans could be regarded as atheistic since they did not hold belief in any deities similar to the Christian God (Okot p'Bitek 1990: 90-102). This is a Westernization of the beliefs of Africans, because it presumes that every belief in a transcendental phenomenon that is not indicated with the word 'God' is a form of atheism. Based on the negative definition of atheism this way of thinking is

false.<sup>4</sup>



Appiah deconstructed the idea of an African identity of his predecessors. He searched for many African identities, which should show themselves once the so-called otherness-machine would be destroyed. With this he meant that the discourse on identity should not be nationalistic or anti-colonial as was the case in the 1950s and 1960s. It should be postcolonial instead. In Appiah's opinion Africans could deny their history of being colonized, but this did not mean that every effort to describe the African

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<sup>4</sup>For in its negative sense atheism means that someone is not a theist (Flew 2000: 36-42). But what a theist exactly believes is not based on knowledge, in the conventional sense of 'justified true belief'. Since it is not known if the belief of theists is true, the only thing people can do is to use a concept such as the word 'God', so that it can be seen to be at least more or less probable. Since this existence of 'God' is thus an idea and not a scientifically proven fact, I do not agree with Okot in his use of the label atheism for all representations of God other than Christian ones.

identity should refer and react on this history. He wanted to look at how Africans are rather than looking at who they are in the mirror of the 'Other'. For both Appiah and Okot p'Bitek this meant that Africans should dissociate themselves from the Pan-African movement and its essentialist ideas. Appiah's deconstruction of the Pan-African idea of one truth, an African identity instead of many identities of African people, showed itself in his search for the identity of the Asante: his own ethnic group. In Appiah's viewpoint an Asante is someone who constructs his identity out of apparently contradicting elements. He is loyal to both the chiefs and the state. He consumes palm wine but also Coca Cola. As the above dust jacket of Appiah's book *In my father's house* shows,<sup>5</sup> such an Asante person can be characterized as a man who is traditional and modern at the same time, leading a bicycle on one hand and having a golden stool hover above his head; the latter is the traditional symbol of unity amongst the Asante (Wilks 1993: 96-126).<sup>6</sup>

## 2.1 The existence of a High God

Idowu and Mbiti believe that Africans know that the High God exists from the moment they are born, since He is responsible for all life. For Idowu, with his Western theological background, it was obvious that the Olodumare was the most important element in the Yoruba belief. In his opinion the ancestors and ancestral worship were not even part of the religion (Idowu 1995: 107-129). The same concerned for Mbiti. He was looking for local names of the One God in the African religion and gave attributes to the local High God, such as omniscience and omnipresence, as if it was the Christian God (Mbiti 1969: 20-25 and Idowu 1962: 38-48).

The postmodern works of Okot p'Bitek and Appiah show that the presumption that Africans originally believed in a High God is not shared by all present-day scholars of African religion. Okot p'Bitek experienced the ideas

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<sup>5</sup> Courtesy <http://www.wtamu.edu/library/books/images/appiah3.jpg> .

<sup>6</sup>The Asante is an ethnic subgroup of the Akan: the major ethnic-linguistic group in Ghana and the Cote d'Ivoire. In the myth of origin it is said that the Akan kingdom was founded in 1701 when a golden stool fell from the sky. This stool became the symbol of the unity of the Akan monarchy. It is said to contain the okra or consciousness of all the Akan. If the golden stool is destroyed, this would be the end of the kingdom.

of Idowu and Mbiti as a distortion of realities of African religions and was especially irate by what he called the ‘Hellenizing’ of African gods. By this he meant the process of attributing a metaphysical dimension to these deities. Instead of describing African religions as such, theologians had tried to present an African alternative to Western Christianity, but still in a Christian format. In the process of Hellenizing Mbiti presented African traditional religions as hierarchical structured wholes in which the top position of all divine beings was reserved for the High God. Idowu had the advantage over Mbiti that he did not present the Yoruba belief as an entirely consistent system, but still his work was Hellenized. For he presented Olodumare as a High God with Christian attributes. However, for Okot p’Bitek it was clear that there was no High God in any African religion. He categorized theologians and liberal missionaries such as Idowu and Mbiti under point (a) and referred to them as Christian apologists.<sup>7</sup>

Scholars of that description served the agenda of Westerners, who were looking for an apology for the colonization of Africa. They legitimated the colonization by emphasizing that it was a necessary step for Africans to see the light of God and become converted to Christianity. Therefore, they should first show that God had revealed himself over African people and that they could be tutored and receive the Christian belief. Their search for a High God served this goal (Okot p’Bitek 1990: 70-80). This line of thinking was started by the comparative religionist Max F. Muller. He was convinced that there was already a look-alike Christian God among African people before Christianity reached Africa. Okot p’Bitek showed that Muller’s idea of a universal revelation was wrong by studying the exact meaning of local divine words in African religions such as Yok. He was convinced that these words were used by missionaries to transform them in the idea of a High God (Okot p’Bitek 1990: 58-70).

Appiah had another starting point in his approach to African religions. He was not looking back at pre-colonial history and cleansing African religions from their colonial elements as Okot p’Bitek did. Instead, he emphasized how African religion is experienced nowadays in different ethnic groups. Appiah described the Asante rituals of these days as being syncretistic. Traditional African religious and modern world religious (Christianity,

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<sup>7</sup> See my Section 1.1.

Islam) elements dominate Asante religious rituals. As an example he gave the wedding of his own sister, which was held in a Methodist church in Kumasi. In the marriage ceremony, a Catholic archbishop was overseeing libation to his family ancestors, carried out by one of the king's senior linguists. Appiah explains this ceremony from the belief in the plurality of invisible spiritual forces and its practical character. In this ritual the emphasis lay on the practice of invoking God. God can be addressed in different styles – Methodist, Catholic, Anglican, Moslem and traditional – and the ancestors can be addressed also. Certainly, for the present-day Asante there is thus no such a thing as one High God! (Appiah 1992: 107-136).

## 2.2 Significance

Idowu's and Mbiti reacted on the ideas of their predecessors that African people were superstitious and had an underdeveloped religious belief. They wanted to show the world that they could do better without their colonial masters and emphasized the richness of their own culture. I agree with Okot p'Bitek that it was not very strategic of these African scholars in this effort to copy the line of thought of Western missionaries and adopt the belief that Africans should have a High God. In their attempt to show that Africans religions were indeed developed, they copied the Western idea about what this meant and were still writing in a Western discourse.

Okot p'Bitek was successful in developing a discourse of decolonization instead. By deconstructing the ideas of his predecessors he cast doubt on the assumption that the High God was part of African indigenous religions. Unfortunately, he was not entirely free from a Western discourse either. In his endeavor to attack the idea of the existence of a High God in African religions he locked himself up in a model that was derived from a discussion on Western theology, the God-is-dead movement of the 1960s (van Rinsum 2001: 90). However, various specialists have advanced ethnographically based arguments to reject his idea of the non-existence of a High God in Africa. Considering for instance the fact that Yoruba had an agricultural society, it is more likely that something like an approachable Rain God would have been the most significant element in the Yoruba belief than an abstract High God. This Rain God for which the people could pour libation and who

was close to the people's imagination was probably more important than a God that lived in Heaven and did not communicate with human beings through the ancestors.<sup>8</sup>

Obviously, the postmodern scholars Okot p'Bitek and Appiah have their disbelief in a High God in common. The difference between them is that Okot p'Bitek, in his resistance towards African colonial religious history in Western scholarship, converted himself to another Western-rooted belief, that of atheism (van Rinsum 2001: 85). Appiah, instead, accepted the common colonial history and tried to unravel the essence of untraditional syncretistic religious practices that take place in Africa today (Appiah 1992: 107-137).

### *Conclusion*

The African scholars Idowu and Mbiti were writing in the margin of modernism. They were influenced by modernist ideas in Western scholarship, but were criticizing it as well. On the one hand they were looking for a system of belief in African religions that would contain the absolute truth about the character of these religions. In this sense, Idowu and Mbiti can be called modern scholars. On the other hand, they were fighting against the negative implications of the Enlightenment ideas. In this struggle they adopted the Christian idea about God to prove that African religions were developed. The existence of a High God became thus part of their idea on what was truth about African religions.

Okot p'Bitek and Appiah are postmodernists. Okot p'Bitek was fully aware of the interests that were served with the introduction of the idea of a High God in African religions. He wanted to show his readers that the way in which for instance Idowu and Mbiti had presented African religions was not as neutral and as objective as they made it appear. This awareness led him to the above categorisation of three groups of scholars studying African

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<sup>8</sup> Austin J. Shelton *Man*, Vol. 64. (Mar.-Apr. 1964), pp. 53-54; also: 'Change in Anaguta traditional Religion', by Elizabeth Isichei, *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1. (1991), pp. 34-57.

religions, all of which he severely criticized. His truth lay in the deconstruction of the ideas of these scholars so that different truths about African religions as they were purified from colonial cultural influences would show themselves. Appiah did not want to put all his effort in reconstructing the past as it was before the colonization. Instead of filtering the past, he wanted to emphasize the identity of Africans today. African religions have been an important element of that identity. Appiah's truth lay in the study of non-traditional forms of religion, in which divine beings, irrespective of their name, could take many forms.

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‘Truth’ and ‘High God’ in the Work of Idowu, Mbiti, Okot p’Bitek and Appiah

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