

# **Jean Price-Mars and Contemporary Scholarship on African Traditional Religion**

by

Celucien L. Joseph, Ph.D.  
celucien\_joseph@yahoo.com  
Assistant Professor of English,  
Indian River State College, Fort Pierce, Florida

## **Abstract**

This essay explores Jean Price-Mars' reasonable arguments and propositions for the religious life and experience of African people. It seeks to demonstrate that religion pervades every aspect and dimension of the African experience. In rereading Price-Mars' ideas on the faith of African people, this essay employs the comparative method used in religion, anthropology, and ethnology to evaluate the fundamental elements of religious life and experience; particular attention is given to African traditional religion. Using the pluralist approach to religion promoted by the philosopher of religion John Hick, this essay is also an attempt to bridge an important gap in the comparative study of religion, Africana Studies, Price-Mars' scholarship, and Haitian studies. The basic argument of this essay suggests Price-Mars as one of the earliest pioneers who has offered a scientific study of African traditional religion in the Black Diaspora, and that he was one of the precursors who had laid the intellectual foundations for contemporary scholarship on African traditional religion as well as anticipated the academic study of African theology and theological ethics, by employing the comparative method.

## **Introduction**

In the history of Western thought, European and American thinkers and theorists of religion have used religion as a marker to include and exclude certain people and races from the metanarratives of human history and to silence their contributions to universal civilizations and human progress in modernity. Both Western thinkers and anthropologists have reduced the African people to a life of religionless-ness or "heathenism." In certain intellectual circles, from the Enlightenment era to the first half-of the twentieth-century, it was also believed that religion was the ground to assess human morality, and what is deemed the good life or the ethical life; hence, Western thinkers also linked the religious and moral life with the life of reason and progress. Like morality, they associated religion with civilization and modernity.

Because religion was interpreted to be the compass that regulates human ethics and behavior, and ultimately facilitated the pathway to civilization and modernity, the religious life of African people was overlooked, as Western scholars have disavowed African history. Consequently, these same theorists, ideologues, and white supremacists have deployed religion as a lens to deny the Black race of human equality; in various unscientific and pseudo-anthropological studies, they advanced the notion that African people were inferior to the white race because of a life devoid of religious commitment and piety.

As a response, the first Black anthropologist, Joseph Auguste Anténor Firmin, in his learned and interdisciplinary work, *De l'égalité des races humaines (The Equality of the Human Races)*, published in 1885 at the emergence of the new disciplines of anthropology and ethnology, brilliantly dispelled the racial myth and racist ideology of the inferiority of African people because of their inability to rise above fetishism and totemism. Following Firmin's footsteps and beyond Firmin, in the first half of the twentieth-century, the father of Haitian ethnology and religious thinker Jean Price-Mars has employed anthropological knowledge, the cross-disciplinary approach, and the comparative method to showcase the religious life of African people before European slavery, colonization, and missionary endeavors in Africa.

Although Price-Mars was reared in both the Haitian Protestant and Catholic-Christian traditions, Price-Mars was a religious pluralist and religious modernist; he acknowledged the merits and contributions of all religions to human flourishing. Price-Mars embraced all religions indiscriminately, and did not subscribe to any religious creed, dogma, or confession.<sup>1</sup> Using the pluralist approach to religion promoted by the philosopher of religion John Hick, this essay is also an attempt to fill in an important gap in the comparative study of religion, Africana Studies, Price-Mars' scholarship, and Haitian studies.

The structure of this essay consists of four major parts. The first part examines the essence of religion by employing the theory of comparative methodology. The second division examines the interpretation of African traditional religion in Western scholarship. The third part of the chapter underscores Price-Mars' historic contributions in the academic study of African traditional religion. Finally, we close the essay with Price-Mars' interpretation of the moral vision (religious/theological ethics) of African traditional religion.

## **The Nature of Religion and the Comparative Method**

In his tour-de-force *Ainsi Parla L'Oncle*, published in 1928, Jean Price-Mars identifies the basic elements of all religion: the reverence for the Sacred or God, priesthood, dance, sacrifice, trance, a system of ethics, and faithful adherents, which he insists form "the most preserving parts of religious rites and that we experience them, either joined together or separately, in the most exalted religions."<sup>2</sup>

Price-Mars concurs that these elementary forms of the religious life result in cases of mysticism, such as in the case of spirit possession; what remains a high possibility is that the religious phenomenon is transfigured universally.<sup>3</sup> Philosopher of religion John Hick advances the idea that we live in a religious universe. Religion is a human phenomenon; however, the concept of religion as interpreted in modern scholarship is an academic invention. Some thinkers have argued that there was never a time in human history in which people have not been religious or committed to a religious faith. Even those who are deemed irreligious or anti-religious have somewhat had a religious encounter or possibly once committed to a religious tradition. This same Hick explains the ambivalence of religion and irreligion in this language:

It is also true that we have to speak today of post-Buddhists, post-Muslims, post-Christians...However the post-religious are still deeply influenced by their religious-cultural past and it remains true that much of the life of humanity flows through the channels of thought and imagination formed by the ancient traditions that we know, in rough order of antiquity, as Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Christianity and Islam.<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless, the religious experience is as complex and ambivalent as the human experience in the modern world. Hick identifies two major responses to the religious life explaining the human experience in the cosmos: religious and naturalistic definitions.

According to the form, religion (or a particular religious tradition) centres upon an awareness of and response to a reality that transcends ourselves and our world, whether the “direction” of transcendence be beyond or within or both. Such definitions presuppose the reality of the intentional object of religious thought and experience; and they are broader or narrower according as this object is characteristic upon generally, for example as a cosmic power, or more specifically, for example as a personal God. Naturalistic definitions on the other hand describe religion as a purely human activity or state of mind. Such definitions have been phenomenological, psychological and sociological.<sup>5</sup>

Generally, religion is good for society and human interactions. Various religious traditions could help enhance the human condition in the modern world. Because religion interweaves with human culture and worldview, learning about various religious traditions could assist us in gaining better understanding and insights about the people who embody cultural practices and traditions that are different from ours. Charles Kimball’s engaging remark in the opening paragraph of his excellent text on the complexity and neutrality of religion is noteworthy:

Religion is arguably the most powerful and pervasive force on earth. Throughout history religious ideas and commitments have inspired individuals and communities of faith to transcend narrow self-interest in pursuit of higher values and truths. The record of history shows that noble acts of love, self-sacrifice, and service to others are frequently rooted in deeply held religious worldviews. At the same time, history clearly shows that religion has often been linked directly to the worst examples of human behavior. It is somewhat trite, but nevertheless sadly true, to say that more wars have been waged, more people killed, and these days more evil perpetrated in the name of religion than by other institutional force in human history.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, religion may influence human actions, social interactions, and human behavior. Geoffrey Parrinder observes that “the intellectual and emotional sides of religion affect behavior. Religion has always been linked with morality, though moral systems differ greatly from place to place. Whether morals can exist without religion or some supernatural belief has been debated, but at least all religions have important moral commandments.”<sup>7</sup> Within this backdrop, we suggest that the religions of the world should be studied comparatively and contrastively, as this method could assist in identifying shared ideas and common ethical values, and points of difference or disaccord between them. In addition, the religions of the world that articulate different conceptions of God in their own terms help us to connect us with God, the Divine, and in the words of John Hick, “the Real.” Not only have these religions embodied “different forms of life in response to the Real,”<sup>8</sup> they also express different response to God and showcase different revelations and manifestations of God. From a pluralistic approach to religious traditions, Hick defines the Real as “ineffable” and that which is “having a nature that is beyond the scope of our networks of human concepts. Thus, the Real in itself cannot properly be said to be personal or impersonal, purposive or non-purposed, good or evil, substance or process, even one or many.”<sup>9</sup> Contrary to Hick’s claim, in the theology of the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), God is a personal Being who has revealed himself to humanity in a personal way, and his creation is geared toward the designated telos, according to his plan, will, and purpose. In their doctrine of God, most Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe that God is actively involved in the world and his ultimate goal is the cosmic redemption of all people and all created things, both seen and unseen, visible and invisible. While he employs the subject pronoun “it” as a reference to the “Real,” which most adherents to the Abrahamic religions would reject, Hick, however, maintains the idea that “The Real is the source and ground of everything, and which is such that in so far as the religious traditions are in soteriological alignment with it they are contexts of salvation/liberation.”<sup>10</sup> The Real, for Hick, is a mystery because,

We cannot describe it as it is, but only as it is thought and experienced in human terms—in traditional scholastic language, not *quoad se* but always *quoad nos*...The difference between there being and there not being an ultimate Reality, which is variously conceived and experienced through the “lenses” of the different religions is thus the difference between a religious and a naturalistic interpretation of religion.<sup>11</sup>

Like John Hick, Jean Price-Mars believes in the plurality of divine revelations, the idea that God’s self-disclosure is clearly known in various practicing religious traditions in the world. As a religious pluralist, he sustains that the revelation of God is not exclusive to any particular religious tradition or any peculiar people; rather, it is hypothesized that God has intentionally made himself known inclusively to all religions and to all people regardless of culture, ethnicity, race, language, and geographical location. In the same line of thought, Price-Mars postulates the notion that God’s revelation was not monolithic, homogeneous, and exclusive; through divine revelation, God interrupted the human narrative and global history through different means and in different ways. This claim does not mean God’s revelation is communicated solely through the religious traditions of the world. The revelation of God is also outside the realm of religion. For example, some scholars of religion have identified some religions without revelation, and that there are religions that do not affirm theism. The transcendent and immanent God who defines reality is not bound by human convention, invention, or tradition.

The revelation of God had imposed “a religious content” to the universe and human existence. Consequently, Hick could theorize this phenomenon in this paragraph:

When we look back into the past we find that religion has been a virtually universal dimension of human life—so much so that man has been defined as the religious animal. For he has displayed an innate tendency to experience his environment as being religiously as well as naturally significant, and to feel required to live in it as such...In the life of primitive man this religious tendency is expressed in a belief in sacred objects, endowed with mana, and in a multitude of nature and ancestral spirits needing to be carefully propitiated. The divine was here crudely apprehended as a plurality of quasi-animal forces which could to some extent be controlled by ritualistic and magical procedures.<sup>12</sup>

While it is possible to periodize the history of most functioning religions in the world today, it is, however, problematic to pinpoint with accuracy the exact time of the very first divine revelation. (However, some people have argued that Kemet predates this idea in terms of writing as well as religious, ethical, and moral texts.) Because religion always links to civilization and culture, we are able to approximate the beginning of religion and religions through the study of human civilizations.

Most religious scholars have concluded that “The development of religion and religious begins to emerge into the light of recorded history as the third millennium B.C. moves towards the period around 2000 B.C.”<sup>13</sup> According to Hick, historically, we can trace the very religious phenomenon and activities to “the Mesopotamia in the Near East and the Indus valley of northern India.”<sup>14</sup> From an evolutionary theory perspective, the elements of religion or religious ideas began from the lowest-form of religious concepts to the highest religious ideas ever conceived by individuals.

The Golden Age of religious actions and innovation began around 800 B.C, in which different cultures and peoples transformatively experienced the various modes of divine revelation through the interruption of the mediatory Spirit of God, and as God attempted to impart his life in the soul of humanity.<sup>15</sup> Hick provides an informative analysis of what he has phrased “the golden age of religious creativity”:

This consisted in a remarkable series of revelatory experiences occurring during the next five hundred or so years in different parts of the world, experiences which deepened and purified men’s conceptions of the ultimate, and which religious faith can only attribute to the pressure of the divine Spirit upon the human spirit.<sup>16</sup>

Hick goes on to list the different stages of this religious creativity of God’s self-disclosure to his creation—from Judaism to Islam—and human response to God:

First came the early Jewish prophets, Amos, Hosea and first Isaiah, declaring that they had heard the Word of the Lord...Then in Persia the great prophet Zoroaster appeared; China produced Lao-tzu and then Confucius; in India the Upanishads were written, and Gotama the Buddha lived, and Mahavira, the founder of the Jain religion and, probably about the end of this period, the writing of the Bhagavad Gita; and Greece produced Pythagoras and then, ending this golden age...Then after the gap of some three hundred years came Jesus of Nazareth and the emergence of Christianity; and after another gap the prophet Mohammed and the rise of Islam.<sup>17</sup>

The first revelation of God, according to Hick’s (Eurocentric) analysis, came in the form of divine speech, which he appropriately named “The Word of God.” He contends that the Bible is an aspect of God’s self-disclosure; in the same line of thought, the final revelation of God ended with the Quran directed to Prophet Mohammed. Hick infers in all of these religious traditions we can witness “moments of divine revelation” in which God communicated his will to humanity not in a single mighty act; his revelations were multiple, progressive, partial, and at different times and places in human history.<sup>18</sup> Hick’s interpretation of divine revelation follows the context and chronology of the Abrahamic religious traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam).

Price-Mars associates the various forms of religious with divine revelation (s). For him, religious mysticism has its roots in God's natural revelation to people. For example, in *Ainsi parla l'Oncle* and other religious writings, Price-Mars studies comparatively the phenomena of Vodou mysticism on a par with Christian mysticism and Islamic mysticism of the Sufi sect. He also offers a comparative analysis of the music and dance of Vodou to the sacred music and dance in Judaism and those of Islam. The religious sacrifice in Dahomean-Vodou is compared to the rite performed in Asia, and the Assyria-Chaldean religious traditions. About the nature of sacrifice in Vodou, he concurs that there are some possible connections or filiation which lead us to believe in almost identical phenomena in a number of ceremonies of worship of different religions in Israelite and Greco-Roman antiquity; that does not mean, however, that each community of faith does not exploit its own inclinations.<sup>19</sup> It is a speculation, he sustains, to suggest that in the beginning of the religious life, a revelation was made to all peoples which had now been lost in the obscurity of time; consequently, we can "establish that the human specificity of mystical sentiment and its inevitable consequence, the sacrifice, and that the sacrifice matter itself, in the form of the victim, has scarcely changed from people to people, from religion to religion... with innumerable variants in Greco-Roman paganism, in Egypt, Persia, China, Japan, India, Africa."<sup>20</sup>

There is not one revelation, but revelations throughout human history. There is not one single center of divine revelation, but centers of divine revelation; there is not one location of divine revelation, but locations of God's revelation; there is not one recipient of God's revelation, but recipients of God's revelation; there is not one human-mediator or agent of divine revelation, but human-mediators or agents of divine revelation.

If there was to be a revelation of the divine reality to mankind it had to be a pluriform revelation, a series of revealing experiences occurring independently within the different streams of human history...None of these expansions from different centres of revelation has of course been simple and uncontested, and a number of alternatives which proved less durable have perished or been absorbed in the process.<sup>21</sup>

The revelation of God to different geographical spheres and human agents has generated different religious responses and interpretations to what was revealed, leading to paradoxically complementary and competing religious traditions. God is the One who has revealed. Consequently, we can conclude that revelation is plural, varied, diverse, trans-ethnic, trans-cultural, trans-racial, trans-national, and global. We can then speak of a "global God-Revealer" who is not limited by space and time. This cosmic Deity is the God of all people and all culture; he is very much concerned about the welfare of everyone. We should be careful not to speak of a "polytheistic God," but of "one God" whose self-disclosure has generated different and multiple concepts of God.

This detailed analysis above is an attempt to establish the intellectual context or a roadmap to better grasp Price-Mars' interpretation of the workings and nature of religion, and his appreciation of African traditional religion; this interpretive grid is also significant to make sense of Price-Mars' underlying thesis that God has revealed himself in the historical past to African people through their religious experience. For Price-Mars, African traditional religion must be investigated comparatively with other religions in the world. Each religion in its way distinctly adds meaning or significance to human reality and our experience in the world. According to Price-Mars, the shared vision of various religious traditions is that "The religious sentiment of the popular masses derives from the same psychological substratum which forged the faith of the humble and ignorant in every country in the world."<sup>22</sup> He goes on to articulate the universal religious language in this manner:

Everywhere man similarly employs the same behavior to attract supernatural grace for himself and that by hardly changing the quality of his offering he obeys the same psychological injunction of employing everywhere the sacrificial matter most to his liking in order to seal his pact with the divinity, except to insert in each ritual gift the mystical qualities which heighten their value in the eyes of the gods.<sup>23</sup>

We already identified above the religious markers Price-Mars has recognized. For example, about the general nature of the ritual of religious sacrifice, he writes informatively that "The idea of oblation, of mystical communion, of reverential homage, of participation of the faithful in the life of the god or intercommunication between the profane and the sacred worlds. Each of these aforesaid considerations envisage an aspect of the rite, and together they bring about a sacrifice so rich in content that it expresses the general sense and the perfect symbol of the ceremony."<sup>24</sup> In the African religious context, the sacrifice bears various objectives:

It is fulfilled in acts of thanksgiving to the gods for their attention, their benevolence toward the sacrifice, individual or group. It is an act of expiation to appease the wrath of the divinity irritated by some voluntary or unconscious offense the effects of which had been translated into calamities of all sorts: maladies, sorrows, unsuccessful enterprises, and so forth.<sup>25</sup>

Next, we consider the phenomenon of the religious trance, and its "religious purpose" in fostering spiritual awakening. Fundamentally, the trance or crisis of possession is the highest and ultimate religious experience in which the individual is empowered by the Divine, or as it is said in Vodou, the *sevite* (adherent or "worshipper") is mounted by a lwa (spirit)—that is the possession of the divine spirit. Price-Mars describes the mystical possession in the supporting details below:



Through these different words we are identifying a universal phenomenon in the diversity of religious and one in which the individual, under the influence of ill-determined causes, is plunged into a crisis sometimes manifested by confused movements of clonic agitation [spasmodic convulsion], accompanied by cries or a flood of unintelligible words. Other times, the individual is the object of sudden transformation: his body trembles, his face changes for the worse, his eyes protrude, and his foaming lips utter hoarse, inarticulate sounds, or even predictions and prophecies... The realization of crisis operates only on the level of the subconscious, therefore beyond any participation of the will of the believer. Here also such a course of action is only possible in a mentality where psychological hypotension plays the principal role...It is in fact the phenomenon of glossolalia [gift of tongue]. It is common to all religions, at least in their beginnings, and is perpetuated in the mystical theology of the cults. And it is because the voodooistic “servants” are mystics that we find again in them the self-same phenomenon just as it is revealed elsewhere.<sup>26</sup>

Price-Mars interprets the religious trance or spirit possession as a “manifestation of divine beatitude.” In this manner of revelation, the Divine invades the human being, both bodily and spiritually. Next, he establishes the connection of the spectacle of spirit possession in African traditional religion such as in the Afro-Haitian Vodou to spirit possession in Christianity. He pronounces: “Does not obeying the laws of the Church, humbling oneself before the *Mysteres* of Religion, performing one’s devotion to the angels and saints of Paradise, form part of the teaching of the Church?”<sup>27</sup> What remains a fundamental religious fact for Price-Mars is that Black people are equal partners in God’s kingdom, and that God has not hidden himself from them. To a certain degree, Price-Mars would appeal to the idea of “spiritual equality” to dispel the narrative of white superiority and the myth of racial hierarchy. Moreover, he provides the supplementary details to enrich our understanding of religion:

Superior religions, even the most advanced, have all been marked in their origins by this elementary process of possession by the divine, by these accounts of strangely close relations between the god and his worshippers, and although they glory now in having attained a high state of spirituality they will retain these encumbrances which from time to time cause them to retrogress toward old forms of cultic worship.<sup>28</sup>

Like the contemporary thinkers of his era, Price-Mars was heavily influenced by the Darwinian evolutionary theory, which would shape his understanding of religion and the different stages of the religious life. Throughout human history, Price-Mars explains that people have deliberately modified their religious practices, rituals, moral codes, and dogmas to enhance the human experience in religion, and accommodate the changes and uncertainties of life.

For example, Price-Mars had subscribed to the theory of the so-called “superior religions” and “lesser religions” because of the belief that some religions have evolved from a lesser ethical system to a higher ethical system, which contributes to spiritual growth and human flourishing. In the same line of thought, Price-Mars has embraced the scholarly consensus that there exists both “revelatory religions” and “non-revelatory religions.” As will be observed in our analysis in subsequent paragraphs in this essay, Price-Mars would contend that African traditional religion is equally valid to any of the world’s religions. It is good to note here that in the first half of the twentieth-century, it was uncommon for scholars of religion to make an apologetic defense for the legitimacy of African religion. A final component he identifies in African traditional religion, Judaism, and Christianity is the performative aspect of religion through ritual of dance. Sacred music and dance are linked to the various manifestations of the religious sentiment.

Need be reminded that in Greco-Roman antiquity, that the dance very often had a sacred character? Did not the Nabis, the Nazirs of Israel, resort to music to provoke possession of the Spirit so that the Eternal God could speak through their line? Since the Hebrew used the word “chag” to express both festival and dance, does not the Bible teach us that David danced and leaped before the ark of the Eternal God, at Obed-Edom and that the ceremony was consummated with a burnt offering and sacrifices of riches.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the common religious practices and rituals African traditional religion shares with other religions, previous studies on African traditional religion, produced by Western thinkers and writers, have denigrated the religious experience of African people, and considered their experience in religion as non-religious and rubbish.

## **The Interpretation of African Traditional Religion in Western Scholarship**

In the academic study of religion, Western scholars of religion have not given African traditional religion its proper place among other equally important religions in the world. Past scholarship on African traditional religion has deployed various derogatory names and concepts to label not only the religious practices of African people but also the African religions that are practiced in the Black Diaspora. In his influential book, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, published in 1973, Nigerian religious scholar and theologian E. Bolaji Idowu mentions the “errors of terminology” as they apply to the nature and interpretation of African traditional religion and the African experience in general; he provides a thorough analysis of such insulting epithets including “primitive,” “savage,” “native,” “fetishism,” “tribe,” “paganism,” “heathenism,” “idolatry,” and “animism.”<sup>30</sup>

Western philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, David Hume, François Marie Arouet Voltaire, Gottfried Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and others often described African traditional religion in negative or superficial terms because their understanding of human nature, reason, progress, culture, and civilization influenced their perception of Africa and African indigenous religion and spirituality.<sup>31</sup> Idowu is correct to infer that when he pronounces the ignorance of the Other or the unknown that is applicable to African religion, that “The unknown is usually the mysterious and is usually surrounded with dread.”<sup>32</sup> African religion became an unknown phenomenon in Western thought not because of its inadequacy or irrelevance; rather, such attitude lies in Western values, and the lack of interest from Western scholars to properly study African traditional religion.

Misconceptions and derogatory appellations about African traditional religion have been proliferated also by Western travelers, missionaries, civil servants, philosophers, ethnologists, and anthropologists as early as in the eighteenth-century to the first-half of the twentieth-century; some of these writers have never visited the Continent, conducted any ethnographic studies on the religious experience of those living in Africa, or engaged in active anthropological fieldwork in any Region of Africa. These thinkers have not only challenged the religious ethos of African people, they doubted any possibility of African people of being monotheists and cogently conceptualized God in theological and metaphysical language. Those who believe in the possibility that African people could worship God quickly clarify that it is not the “Judeo-Christian God” they worship. They speak about the “African gods” with a small “g” and add an “s” at the end of the word god. They also use terms like “false gods” and “idols” to frame the African experience in religion. Others who sustain the idea that African people do worship God would argue the African Supreme Being is a distant Deity, and that he is not near African people and not actively involved in their affairs. In his interpretation of the misreading of African vision of God in Western scholarship, Idowu’s observation is worth noting: “If there is an African concept of God, if African people know God, what or which God? Their own God or “the real God”? This is precisely the predicament in which scholars currently find themselves. The question “You mean, his own God? Not the real God.”<sup>33</sup>

Idowu has suggested that the ideas of a “high god” and a “supreme God” are Western inventions to discriminate against the peoples and cultures that might hold contrary opinions about the precise nature of God. The religious sensibilities of African people are often seen as irreligious, unreasonable, unsystematic, and non-theological as compared to the religious experience of the people in Western societies and the so-called civilized countries. The “Dark Continent” is the common epithet used to depict the spiritual state of continental Africa and alienate African people from other people in the world. German-Swiss journalist and writer Emil Ludwig concluded that Black people in Africa had no concept of God and that it is impossible for them to think about God theologically; as he once questioned, “How can the untutored African conceive God? How can this be?”<sup>34</sup> Consequently, for Ludwig, the African mind was not fully developed according to Western standards that it should be engaged in theological speculations or philosophical thinking about the nature and being of God.

Ludwig made it plain that “Deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing.”<sup>35</sup> The nineteenth century British explorer, ethnologist, and geographer Sir Richard Francis Burton wrote skeptically and comically about African faith and idea of God:

The African holds the illogical belief that his hark, eternal Deity can be influenced by intercessions animate and inanimate, human and bestial; that the leopard and the crocodile, like the wali (saint) and the prophet, and that the fetish shrub, like the Salagram, the Karabela clay, or the bite f True Cross, may, by some inexplicable process, control the inscrutable course of mundane law.<sup>36</sup>

Comparatively, William Bosman, a merchant originated from the Dutch Republic, travelled to the Gold Coast (modern day Ghana) in the early eighteenth century, reported in his famous book, *Nauwkeurige beschrijving van de Guinese Goud- Tand- en Slavekust* (1703), that West African people worship inanimate objects as gods and that they were idol worshippers. He describes the religious crisis of the West African people in this language: “It is really to be lamented that the negroes idolize such worthless Nothings by reason that several amongst them have no very unjust idea of the Deity...The Devil is annually banished from all their towns with an abundance of Ceremony, at an appointed time set apart for that end.”<sup>37</sup> Not only European thinkers accused African people of practicing idolatry, cannibalism, and superstition, even those who do affirm the religious impulse of African people maintained that African traditional religion was inferior to other religious traditions such as Judaism, Christianity, or Islam; critics who have been influenced by the evolutionary theory of religion would place “fetishism at the bottom, followed by polytheism and then monotheism.”<sup>38</sup> African traditional religion would either fall under the first or second category of the evolutionary steps of religion, and the final phase of the evolutionary hierarchy would be granted to non-African religions.

Ugandan thinker and poet Okot P’Bitek, in his excellent work *Decolonizing African Religions*, provides an informative and critical overview of the misrepresentation of African traditional religion in Western scholarship. He emphasizes how Western anthropologists and ethnologists have constructed an unreliable narrative about the religious experience and culture of African people. Based on his research, he reaches two major inferences about methodology and academic interest.

First, that whereas different schools of social anthropology may quarrel bitterly over *methods*, they may all share the same view that the population of the world is divisible into two: one, their own, *civilized*, and the rest, *primitive*. The second conclusion is that Western scholarships have never been genuinely interested in African religions *per se*. Their works have all been part and parcel of some controversy or debate in the Western world...<sup>39</sup>

Because Western thinkers had no genuine interest in African humanity, they described the African way of life as “anarchy, promiscuity, and cruel living.”<sup>40</sup> Therefore, P’Bitek could declare this poignant statement about the Western imagination of African people: “One of the most perplexing and amazing phenomena of Western scholarship is its almost morbid fascination and preoccupation with the ‘primitive,’ and the hostile and arrogant language of the philosophers, historians, theologians, and anthropologists. Like the ogres of the tales of northern Uganda, unprovoked, Western scholars seek out peoples living in peace, and heap insults on their heads.”<sup>41</sup> The idea of primitivism or “primitive” has marked Western literary production and intellectual discourse in reference to Africa. Marianna Torgovnick, in her powerful book *Gone Primitive*, offers an insightful analysis of European obsession with the life of the primitives, as in communicated literature and intellectual history books. Torgovnick coined the phrase the “primitivist discourse” to underscore the basic grammar of Western psychological, anthropological, and ethnographic studies:

To study the primitive is thus to enter the exotic world which is also a familiar world. That world is structured by sets of images and ideas that have slipped from their original metaphoric status to control perceptions of primitives...Primitives are like children. Primitives are our untamed selves, our id forces—libidinous, irrational, violent, dangerous. Primitives are mystics, in tune with nature, part of its harmonies. Primitives are free. Primitives exist as the “lowest cultural levels”; we occupy the “highest,” in the metaphors of stratification and hierarchy...<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore, her remark about the characterization of the primitive in Euro-American history is enlightening:

The primitive does what we ask it to do. Voiceless, it lets us speak for it. It is our ventriloquist’s dummy—or so we like to think...The real secret of the primitive in this century has often been the same secret as always: the primitive can be—as has been, will be (?)—whatever Euro-Americans want it to be. It tells us what we want it to tell us...Africa is the quintessential locus of the primitive: it tells a tale of “the eternal beginning” and gives “the most intense sentiment of returning to the land of my youth”; it is “the immemorially known.” For Euro-Americans, then, to study the primitive brings us always back to ourselves, which we reveal in the act of defining the Other.<sup>43</sup>

The primitivist discourse is pertinent to Western perspective on African traditional religion, which is often depicted as “religious otherness.” For example, scholars of religion have proposed three major theories about the beginning of religion and human attitude toward the Divine. In other words, the religious experience can be explained in three different stages: Fetishism, Polytheism, and Monotheism.

Interestingly, as early as in the eighteenth century to early twentieth-century, many Western thinkers believed that the religious experience of African people remained static and unevolved. While some have maintained that polytheism was the primary religion of African people; others have projected that fetishism, the bottom of the religious hierarchy, best describes the religious sensibility of Africa's people. In other words, their primitive state of religious experience never changed from their "eternal beginning." Primitivism is associated with the fetishist stage of (African) religion.

Additionally, P'Bitek writes more lucidly about the ideological interpretation of the essence of African traditional religion in Western thought. For him, European misapprehension about the religious devotion of African people is nothing short of an intellectual crisis in the history of Africa-European relations. Insightfully, he makes this observation:

If the missionaries called African deities God because they believed that these were the local names of the Supreme God, and also because they sought to meet the Africans on their own ground, Western anthropologists were confronted with a different problem: that of interpreting African deities and religious ideas to the Western world. This they could only do in terms of Western concepts. The anthropologists to whom the soul and gods had no reality interpreted African religions in terms of psychological, biological or sociological theories. Christian anthropologists, on the other hand, described African religious beliefs in Christian concepts, and called African deities God.<sup>44</sup>

This same P'Bitek, whose religious commitment was probably radical agnosticism, also declares that "'Animism,' 'Fetishism' or belief in a High God are products of the Western mind. There are no animists' in Africa."<sup>45</sup> He was also discontent about how trained African religious scholars and theologians have handled this pivotal issue and equally responded unsatisfactorily to the "religious charges" against Africa and African religion.

In the field of religious studies African students have responded with a vigorous condemnation and rejection of the claims of Western scholarship which presented their peoples as "primitive pagans." But, instead of carrying out systematic studies of the beliefs of their peoples, and presenting them as African peoples actually know them, the African scholars, smarting under the insults of the West, claimed that African people knew the Christian God long before the missionaries told them about it. African deities were selected and robbed with awkward Hellenistic garments by Jomo Kenyatta, J.B. Danquah, K.A. Busia, W. Abraham, E.B. Idowu and others.<sup>46</sup>

P'Bitek has not offered any satisfactory solution to the misconception and misinterpretation of the religion of African people both by Western scholars and trained African thinkers or religious scholars of African descent.

His own vision about African religion seems to be paradoxical, conflicting, and even contradictory. For him, only “African thinkers” can properly interpret the experience of African people in religion. It seems that one had to be born “African” and has lived among the people of Africa to have an expert opinion on Africa’s religious life. On the other hand, he is not satisfied with the issuing research he has anticipated or hoped for even from native-born African people and those who have reared on African soil. Notably, his positive remark is worth reproducing here:

It may be true that the vitality of African societies is bound up with their religious beliefs and practices. It is therefore highly important that these beliefs be properly understood. The interpretation of African deities in terms of the Christian God does not help us to understand the nature of the African deities as African peoples conceive them.<sup>47</sup>

He also concurs that African indigenous people do not subscribe to a God who is transcendent, supreme, and majestic. To this view, we respond in the following way: if God is not human and physical, and if he is the Creator and Supreme Judge, as affirmed in the language of many African traditional cultures, he must be different from human beings he had created, and must possess essential divine attributes that make him distinctively and supremely “God.” The underlying problem with P’Bitek’s thesis is not so much about how African people understand God in their own way; the conundrum lies in P’Bitek’s refusal to associate the communicable attributes of African deities or *orisha* with those of the Christian God: “African scholars, trying to interpret the religious ideas of their countrymen in terms of European thought, and also anxious to defend Africa from the intellectual arrogance of the West, presented African deities complete with the attributes of the Christian God.”<sup>48</sup> Another equally difficulty with P’Bitek’s assessment on this matter pertains to the failure of language to describe “authentically” the religious ideas and vision of African people. He thus remarks:

African peoples may describe their deities as “strong” but not “omnipotent”; “wise,” not “omniscient”; “old,” not “eternal”; “great,” not “omnipotent.” The greek metaphysical terms are meaningless in African thinking...Omnipotence implies infinite power, not merely the power of clearing the forest, as the Ngombe of the Congo describe their deity; the great equatorial forest that once covered most of East Africa has been completely destroyed by man. Nor does the term mean having the power of “bending even majesties,” which a political mob or an assassin can easily effect.”<sup>49</sup>

As a poet and multilingual speaker, P'Bitek must have had a clear and effective command and understanding of linguistic dynamics. The translation from one language to another and the rendering of one concept from one language to another, however, is a complex phenomenon, and that often could fail human perception and understanding of the world, and what could be thought, seen, and expressed. This is applicable to any human language or culture—even in the native tongues of African people in which they convey their ideas about God and their articulation about their own religious sensibility. Interestingly, this same P'Bitek, who has defended the authenticity of the religion of African people, is very pessimistic about its future and the utility of African deities. The radical agnostic predicted the end of African traditional religion because he believed in the primacy of science over religion.

The belief in these [African] deities provide the explanations as well as the methods of dealing with misfortunes and ill-health. With the advance of medical knowledge, perhaps one day, the people of northern Uganda and other peoples of Africa will tell the diviners, in the words of Voltaire, “You have made ample use of the time of ignorance, superstition and infatuation, to strip us of our inheritance, and strange us under your feet, that you might fatten on the substance of the unfortunate but tremble for fear that the day of reason will arrive.”<sup>50</sup>

By implications, for P'Bitek, the religiosity for African people is directly associated with their ignorance of modernity, scientific revolution, and the life of progress and reason that often characterized contemporary Western societies. It is doubtful, however, that non-theistic humanism and atheistic secularism will satisfactorily fulfill the spiritual void of African people or any people in the modern world. On the other hand, British scholar of African traditional religion Geoffrey Parrinder, in various important studies on African religion, has engaged several scholars who have demonized the religious sensibility of the African people. Nonetheless, Parrinder himself has rejected animism—against Price-Mars' thesis; he used some inappropriate epithets to characterize African indigenous religion and differentiate it from the Abrahamic faiths, especially from Christianity. He describes the historic religious practices of the African people as “paganism” and the religion practiced in West Africa in the regions of Nigeria and Ghana as “polytheism.” He also states that African people practiced “partial worship”<sup>51</sup> in the Christian understanding or interpretation of worship as complete devotion to one God and that the African people also “believe without worship.”<sup>52</sup> Hence, the African people are pagans and polytheists. It is unfair to use Christianity as a lens or the only parameter to evaluate the religious character of African people and their piety. For Parrinder, African people have moved from polytheism to monotheism, from paganism to “standard religion.” As he has remarked:



In West Africa, in particular, men believe in great pantheons of gods which are diverse as the gods of the Greeks or the Hindus. Many of these gods are the expression of forces of nature, which men fear or try to propitiate: These gods generally have their own temples and priests, and their worshippers cannot justifiably be called Animists, but Polytheists, since they worship a variety of gods.<sup>53</sup>

In addition, Parrinder rejects Father Schmidt's "theory of a general primitive monotheism of Africa...that all peoples had once believed in one God from the time of Adam though many of them later fell into polytheism."<sup>54</sup> In response, Parrinder denies the possibility of exclusive African monotheism by pronouncing brazenly: "There is no solid evidence to support this in West Africa."<sup>55</sup> Elsewhere, he writes discriminatorily against African traditional faith and from the typical Western ideology about African cultures and religious belief, as compared to the cultures and religious traditions in Western societies; both directly and indirectly, he affirms the sentimental attitude of what other Western thinkers long (dis-) believed about the religion of Africa:

There are numerous writers on Africa who consider that Africans once worshipped one God alone, and that they have degenerated into polytheism. A similar view is held by those who believe in the diffusion of culture and religion from a common source, usually thought to be Egypt. Where modern peoples are below of the Egyptians that does not mean, it is contended, that they never attained such heights, but that they have lost their former achievements. So, Africans may not be "primitive" but were, until recently, in a state of degeneration from a former high culture.<sup>56</sup>

Edwin W. Smith, whom Parrinder praises for his terrific writings on African religion, in the 1947 "Foreword" to Parrinder's *West African Religion*, consents that "He (Parrinder) correctly classifies the religion as Polytheism and this immediately puts a new face on it. 'Fetichism' we think of as something brutal, credulous, irrational. We have advanced beyond polytheism, but it is not, I think, inherently absurd."<sup>57</sup> While Smith has erroneously employed polytheism to represent the religious belief of African people, elsewhere, he introduces the discourteous concept of polydemonism as an appropriate characterization of African faith: "Besides the high and lesser beings who may be dignified by the title 'gods,' there is a multitude of other spirits, which, if taken alone, might warrant us in speaking of polydemonism rather than polytheism."<sup>58</sup> Comparatively, in contradiction to Price-Mars' underlying claim, both Smith and Parrinder have rejected animism as a suitable theory for African religion; Smith has suggested "dynamism" as a reference to "the belief in, and the practices associated with the belief in, impersonal, pervasive, mysterious forces acting through charms and amulets, words, spells, divinations."<sup>59</sup>

Moreover, Parrinder does not believe that African traditional religion is on par with Christianity nor does it possess equal merit as a religious tradition; according to him, it is the isolation of the Continent from the rest of the world that had contributed much to its backwardness and retardation, as compared to Western civilization or other civilizations in the modern world that had progressed into modernity and transition to the age of reason.

We come to believe that African religion might “naturally” have developed itself to the heights of Christianity. Infusion of new ideas from the outside has benefited all religions, and one undoubted factor in retarding African religion in the past has been the isolation of tropical Africa from the rest of the world.... [As a result] It is important now to treat of African religion separately from the religious beliefs of other parts of the world.<sup>60</sup>

In the closing words of his “Foreword,” Smith’s allegation about African faith is very ideological like that of Parrinder. He supposes the superiority of Christianity as compared to “the pagan religion” of African polytheists; as he implies, because African paganism is too deep, he doubts the possibility of African redemption and that an African would totally renounce his/her pagan practices even when converted to Christianity. It is important to quote his words in full here:

I hope that someday Dr. Parrinder, or someone equally competent, will follow up this study of the pagan religion with a study of the actual religion of those Africans who in various degrees of reality have accepted Christianity. It is not to be expected that they have made, or can make, a complete break with the past, however much they profess to do so. What in Christianity most attracted these polytheists and how precisely did they react to it? Do preachers and teachers deliberately set themselves to relate the new religion to the old? Christianity may thus be enriched from pagan sources. On the other hand, it may be debased when the lower elements of paganism are perpetuated.<sup>61</sup>

While many European Christian missionaries and theologians have made considerable contributions to our understanding of African traditional religion and cultures, Parrinder, Smith, and Taylor, as one writer has put it, were among the trained theologians and pioneers from the West whose chief objective was to win “the hearts of new African elite for the Christian God by trying to find similarities between Christianity and the traditional religion.”<sup>62</sup> In his critical study of the works of European missionaries and theologians in Africa in the twentieth-century, Umar Habila Dadem Danfulani’s engaging and incisive criticisms about Parrinder’s body of work is worth noting here:

An Outstanding Christian apologist who not only pioneered but also popularized exploration into the theological interpretation of the West African traditional religions was Parrinder. Parrinder did not use traditional religion as an evangelical tool, but as a systematical and theological presentation, and approach that greatly influenced a number of indigenous West African Christian theologians...Parrinder collated in general the *sensus religiosus or religious universals* found in Yoruba, Ewe, Akan and Igbo religions and those of other kindred peoples, closely following the enumerative approach of Frazier. Through this method, he brought into focus, many religious phenomena from different parts of the continent. He does not only give a descriptive presentation but also a theological explanation of his themes, using his Western Christian theological concepts and formulations. Parrinder did this in order to present the nature of the major beliefs and practices of these deeply religious peoples.<sup>63</sup>

In addition, Danfulani has argued that Geoffrey Parrinder homogenized West African religions as a whole and neglected the historical development of these various religious ideas and concepts in various regions in West Africa; he also undermined the interplays between West African philosophy, cosmology, rituals, and the religious practices and beliefs of the West African people.<sup>64</sup>

## **The Price-Marsian Turn in the Study of African Religion**

Interestingly, Price-Mars, employing the comparative method, who has written insightfully and cogently about West African religions and covered a great deal of scholarly information of the religious experience of Africa, before the publication of Parrinder's major work, *West African Religion*, in 1949, has been ignored in Western Scholarship on the study of African traditional religion. Parrinder's subsequent important works on African indigenous faith include *Religion in an African City*, published in 1953, and correspondingly, *African Traditional Religion*, published in 1954. Price-Mars has written his major work, *Ainsi parla l'Oncle* in 1928—twenty-one years before the publication of Parrinder's very first book on the religious sensibilities of the West African people—on African traditional religions, cultures, and civilizations before Parrinder. Price-Mars, a contemporary of Parrinder, would investigate other dynamics in African traditional religion and cultures and compared them to those in Haiti and the rest of the Black Diaspora in subsequent writings including *Une étape de l'évolution haïtienne*, published in 1929, and *Formation ethnique, folklore et culture du peuple haïtien*, published in 1939. All of these writings preceded those of Parrinder and other “glorified European thinkers and scholars” who began to write about the West African experience in religion in the second half of the twentieth-century.

Unfortunately, Price-Mars's enormous contributions to the study of pre-colonial African civilizations and African traditional religious beliefs and cosmology have not been acknowledged in Anglophone scholarship. To our great dismay, what remains a historical fact and a scholarly norm in Euro-American scholarship is the intentional disengagement of reputable works published by Black scholars and continental African thinkers.

Nonetheless, trained African scholars and theologians E. Boljai Idowu, John Mbiti, and J. O. Awolalu have made a revolutionary shift in the investigation of African traditional religion; many thinkers have described their work as "representing different shades of what may be called a 'theology of continuity with its advocacy of the respectability of African religions. Their studies have served as models for the field both in schools, universities and seminaries.'"<sup>65</sup> Others have proposed that these African thinkers have spread speculate ideology, as noted in this statement: "But they have also been criticized for being 'idealist' and ahistorical for using 'Judeo-Christian spectacles' to view African religions and for constructing homologies between Western Christian and African religious ideas."<sup>66</sup> For example, Idowu has reasoned rightly that while there were some Western scholars who attempted "to write off Africa as a spiritual desert, there were, undoubtedly, a few who had the uneasy feeling that the story of a spiritual vacuum for a whole continent of peoples could be entirely true."<sup>67</sup> It was Price-Mars, however, who made the radical turn in the study of African tradition religion in the first half of the twentieth century.

In *Ainsi parla l'Oncle*, Price-Mars has devoted several chapters to the study of pre-colonial African general history and civilizations, and linked the diasporic heritage of the African diaspora with ancestral cultural traditions and practices in Africa. (The chapters were previously delivered as public lectures in various locations in the country.) Price-Mars is also concerned about unearthing and exegeting the thriving African religious traditions that existed in the Continent before African people encountered the Europeans and were exposed to Western version of missionary Christianity. He relies on "the most advanced references on Africa available in the early twentieth century."<sup>68</sup> His objective was "to establish the map of religious faith of the Negro according to the map of the slave trade."<sup>69</sup> As Antoine affirms, Price-Mars' investigation about Africa "contains a wealth of information which evidences Price-Mars' long and patient research on the various peoples of Africa."<sup>70</sup> With intellectual brilliance, persuasive rhetoric, Price-Mars chronicles the glorious history of the "Old Continent," and dismiss the stereotypes that Africa was the land of barbarism and savagery. With detailed information and careful interpretation of African history and religious life, Price-Mars has forcefully showcased that "The Dark Continent" was the mother of human civilization and progress.

He recalled the memory of the theocratic state of the Founta-Djallon in French Guinea where Peuhl and Mandingos “constantly showed a taste for the study of belles-lettres up to our days.” The people of Benin and of Yoruba have made themselves known by their works in bronze as well as in clay, “revealing a remarkable sense of beauty.” Then he recalled the memory of the political and social organization of the Kingdom of Dahomey whose civil administration, army and sense of discipline were of the highest order. Thanks to the Kingdom’s cohesion it remained independent under the same dynasty from the sixteenth century until the French conquest in 1894.<sup>71</sup>

Through his brilliant and forceful vindicationist discourse, Price-Mars was among the few Black writers in the Diaspora, in the first half of the twentieth-century, who sought to rehabilitate African traditional religion and pre-colonial civilizations in the academic study of religion and world history. In *Thus Spoke for Uncle*, he has devoted three full chapters—which bear the following titles: “Africa, Its Races and Its Civilization,” “Africa and the External World,” and “African Animism.”—to investigate pre-colonial Africa and the study of the religious sentiments of African people. In other complementary chapters in the book where he explains the Haitian life and religious experience—bearing such titles “Popular Beliefs,” “The Religious Sentiments of the Haitian Masses;” and the “Appendix”—Price-Mars links Haitian cultural practices and religious traditions to those of ancestral Africa. In other publications such as *Formation ethnique, Folk-lore et culture du peuple haïtien*, and *Une étape de l'évolution haïtienne. Étude de socio-psychologie* (See the chapter titled on “Les Croyances”), Price-Mars has offered compelling propositions and arguments to substantiate this underlying thesis.

Using the comparative methodology, in his discussion on the concept of God in African tradition religion, Price-Mars would anticipate the brilliant studies by Joseph Kwame Kyeretwie Boakye Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion* (1944); Bolaji Idowu’s *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief* (1962); and John S. Mbiti’s *Concepts of God in Africa* (1970). As a precursor, Price-Mars has laid the foundation for a decolonial turn in the academic study of African history, African traditional religion, and African theology. Price-Mars’ postcolonial turn in African scholarship also anticipated important religious works done by African scholars in post-independent Africa such as John Mbiti’s *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969); Okot P'Bitek’s *African Religions and Western Scholarship* (1970); Idowu’s *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (1973); Kofi Asare Opoku’s *West African Traditional Religion* (1978); and J. Omoşade Awolalu’s *West African traditional religion* (1979).

Retrospectively, as noted in our previous analysis, African tradition religion has been ostracized in Western scholarship. Western scholars not only rejected the religious life of African people, they also challenged the religious sensibility of the Haitian people and stereotyped their belief as “black magic,” “sorcery,” “fetish,” and “cannibalism.” Price-Mars has put forth the argument that the descendants of the Dahomeans in Haiti did not continue the animism, the ancestral faith, but created something new:

*Création nouvelle, il n'est ni la reproduction intangible de l'animisme dahoméen, ni la magie noire que les mercantis imbéciles de la plume dénoncent avec tant d'emphase et de malice afin de mieux accuser le peuple haïtien de sorcellerie, de cannibalisme et de maléfices.*<sup>72</sup>

Price-Mars informs us that before 1789, the year of the French Revolution, Western thinkers, colonialists, and enslavers at Saint-Domingue believed that a Black person was incapable of moving forward intellectually. Price-Mars explains the cause of this false belief as reflective of the fact that they ignored the historical past of African civilizations.

*Et d'abord, avant 1789, on pouvait très légitimement supposer, à Saint-Domingue, que le negre était incapable de s'élever au-dessus d'un certain niveau primaire de savoir. Non seulement, on ignorait le passé historique des civilisations, mais ni l'ethnographie comparée ni l'anthropologie, malgré l'incertitude de leurs méthodes actuelles, n'étaient encore nées. Au demeurant, le negre n'avait de valeur que celle de sa structure et de son endurance*<sup>73</sup>.

Price-Mars laments that religious scholars in the Diaspora have been substantially influenced by Western discourse that demonizes African traditional religion; the predicament of Black scholarship is that Black thinkers have also spread these same pseudo beliefs, the European unwarranted claims about Africa's religious system. The mis-interpretation of African tradition religion, according to Price-Mars, is not uplifting and intellectually effective:

*Ils ont été obsédés par l'opinion générale très fausse que les Européens se font ou se sont faite des religions africaines. Pour tous les auteurs d'Histoire Générale, pour les géographes, les voyageurs, les explorateurs, pour les premiers essayistes de l'histoire des religions, l'Afrique est la terre classique du fétichisme.*<sup>74</sup>

In the same line of thought, Black Christians who have subscribed to the European unfounded claims about the religion of African people repeat, "*Les negres d'Afriques sont fetichistes.*"<sup>75</sup> We should ask at this juncture of this conversation what is then fetishism?

In a chapter entitled "African Animism," in *Ainsi parla l'Oncle*, Price-Mars intends to respond to this very question to challenge his critics. Countering contemporary scholarship on African religion, he begins the chapter with this introductory words: "A very old tradition on the misconceptions and on an interpretation that is as superficial as it is arbitrary, grips most of Africa in the mesh of fetishism."<sup>76</sup>

Hence, he seeks to inquire this same topic: “What is fetishism?”<sup>77</sup> The rhetorical tone of the initial thought here clearly indicates Price-Mars is entering in an intellectual battle with his European interlocutors, and in the process, he seeks to correct an epistemological transgression about the African experience in religion. As a result, Price-Mars would cite the definition of fetishism provided by Charles de Brosses, who in a paper delivered in 1787 to the Académie des Inscriptions, rendered the concept as “*Le culte des objets matériels*”<sup>78</sup> (The worship or cult of material objects). Price-Mars concurs that De Brosses employs the term “to characterize the worship in which Negroes seemed to materialize natural objects...I call in general by this name (fetishism) any religion that has animals or inanimate earthly beings as the object of worship.”<sup>79</sup> Accordingly, Price-Mars explains that it was this same De Brosses who “*l’a fait entrer dans le langage courant en lui assignant le rôle d’être à l’origine de toutes les religions.* »<sup>80</sup> This same Price-Mars has contended the concept is not an accurate characteristic of African religion, and that it is a misinterpretation of a poorly observed phenomenon.<sup>81</sup> In other words, Western thinkers have misunderstood this religious phenomenon and as a result, famously appropriated it as fetishism. Nonetheless, the Portuguese sailors, who had first established contact with the Black people of West Africa, wrongly used the word *Feitico*, which is derived from the Latin word *factitius* meaning artificial, to denote the observable religious activity of various African ethnic populations in which African devotees rendered homage or reverence to certain material objects such as shells, stones, or other natural objects; hence, they misconceived the observable African religious ritual as fetishism, and called these symbols of worship “fetishes.”<sup>82</sup> The word “juju” was also used to describe the religious experience of West Africans; it is derived from the French word “joujou,” which simply translates as “toy” in English. African religion was merely conceived as a form of human entertainment, a playful and humorous phenomenon.

Western critics have consistently put forth the notion that the religion of African people should not be taken as authentic religious experience or genuine spirituality. In summary, the word fetish was used not only to describe the religious activities, the charms and sacred emblems of West Africa, it was also deployed to label the whole of the religion of African people.<sup>83</sup> R. S. Rattray in his highly-esteemed work *Religion & Art in Ashanti*, published in 1923, only five years before the publication of Price-Mars’s *Ainsi Parla l’Oncle* in 1928, differentiates fetishism and the worship of God in West Africa:

Fetishes may form part of an emblem of god, but fetish and god are in themselves distinct, and are so regarded by the Ashanti; the main power, or the most important spirit in a god comes directly or indirectly from Nyame, the Supreme God, whereas the power or spirit in a fetish comes from plants or trees, and sometimes directly or indirectly from fairies, forest monsters, witches, or from sort of unholy contact with death; a god is the god of the many, the family, the clan, or the nation. A fetish is generally personal to its owner.<sup>84</sup>

Price-Mars clarifies that fetishism is not a religion, and that African people do not render homage to material objects. Rather, they revered the Spirit whom they believed incarnated in certain material objects and natural phenomena such as the seas, earth, rivers, forest, trees, etc. It is that which modern science, based on careful research, rightly called animism, he proposes. The original text is as follows :

*L'observation portugaise n'avait marqué qu'une partie du phénomène qu'elle prétendait qualifier et expliquer. Le Fétichisme n'est pas une religion. Les noirs d'Afrique ne rendent pas d'hommages as des objets matériels. Ils vénèrent l'esprit qu'ils croient incarnés dans certaines formes de la matière et particulièrement dans les grandes forces cosmiques : La Mer, la Terre, les Fleuves, la Forêt, etc. C'est ce que la science moderne à force de patientes recherches a appelé l'Animisme.*<sup>85</sup>

Elsewhere, he writes back to his interlocutors in this strongly apologetic tone:

The observation as it was established is not only incomplete, it is false because it is the result of misleading appearances. Unfortunately, the doctrine to which it gave birth has sanctioned an error which is now ineradicable. No, it is not the shell, or the stone, or the image of sculptured wood, or even the animals that the indigenous of Africa worship. The most backward of these men can be convinced that an imponderable element, an occult force is sometimes in this body or that animal, just as the Forest, the Thunder, the River, the Sea, the Earth appears to him to be endowed with as will, desires, passions, and likewise are empowered to act as Forces.<sup>86</sup>

Price-Mars rejects the popular thesis among European travel writers, geographers, historians, and anthropologists who describe traditional African religion as superstition and magic. By countering the idea, he suggests that the religious life is the antithesis to magic or superstition for “*La magie n'est que la contrefaçon de la religion, la superstition n'en est que la déformation ou la caricature.*”<sup>87</sup> Price-Mars avers the universality of superstition: “It is true that superstition is universal, and one might even venture the aphorism: superstition is the inevitable corollary of religion” (“*Tant il est vrai que la superstition est universelle, on pourrait même hasarder l'aphorisme: la superstition est le corollaire fatal de la religion.*”<sup>88</sup>)

African people make a sharp distinction between religion and magic, the magician and the serviteur of the gods. Price-Mars aptly establishes the dissimilarity between these two phenomena by projecting that sorcery and religion are two different entities. As he observes:



Should we go back in time to the most distant origins of Africa, we find a distinction between the Magician and the serviteur of the gods, the first being very much feared in these small communities owing to his social evil-doing. Indeed, it is startling to think of the legal offenses being committed every day in these regions by an individual accused of magic. For the protection of the community, in the name of the law which is the expression of social custom and preservation, the accused was subjected to an ordeal which was most often a prompt sentence to death by hanging, or stoning, without burial for the body of the guilt. There was perhaps nothing more tragic than the fate of the individual suspected of sorcery in the African communities.<sup>89</sup>

Price-Mars also links the deliberate rejection of African religiosity and past civilizations by white critics with the race problem in modernity. “*Pendant trois cents ans environ, la race vécut dans cet état de stagnation morale et intellectuelle d’une incomparable bassesse. Il va sans dire que cela s’entend de la grosse masse des esclaves, du monde noir.*»<sup>90</sup> Price-Mars has not only questioned the idea of the race concept, he informs us that it does not exist, and that race is categorically a myth. “*La race pure est un mythe an anthropologie. Au contraire, le métissage humain est un fait biologique aussi certain et aussi indélébile que le rattachement de notre organisme a quelque forme plus humble de la série animale.*»<sup>91</sup> He posits that there is only one race : the human race. In an apologetic tone, he declares that God—who is infinitely wise, just and good—in his infinite wisdom has never created the Black people as inferior (“*Dieu...qui est infiniment sage, juste et bon...Dieu dans son infinie sagesse a fait de la race noire une race a jamais inférieure.*”<sup>92</sup>) Price-Mars not only affirms the spiritual equality of all people, he is categorically asserting their ontological and social equality before God. Yet, elsewhere, he seems to contradict his own thesis when he converges religion and race; he explains how the world’s empires and colonial powers have conquered peoples and civilizations under both the banner of race and religion. Both racial solidarity and common allegiance to a shared faith galvanize nations and peoples toward the fulfillment of their national goals or patriotic zeal.<sup>93</sup>

In Western history of ideas, European thinkers and pro-slavery advocates have distorted African history and the history of the people of African ancestry in the Diaspora because of the crisis of slavery and economic exploitation. Accordingly, “For four hundred years, the white race, without pity or mercy, aroused internecine war in Africa, pitting Negro against Negro, chasing them without respite or mercy, in order to satisfy this ignoble traffic in human flesh and, in so doing, destroying all native civilization and culture.”<sup>94</sup> Because of slavery and Western colonization, American-European thinkers also endorsed the idea that African people in general “were the outcasts of humanity, without a history, without morality, without religion, and had to be infused by whatever means available with new moral values, outfitted with a new humanity.”<sup>95</sup> Price-Mars laments on the disavowal of African history and the exclusion of African religion in academic study as an intellectual devastation.

The historical amnesia about pre-colonial African civilizations had a profound psychological and spiritual bearing on the people in the African Diaspora as well as on Black Atlantic intellectuals.

At that point, everything which was authentically indigenous—language, mores, sentiments, beliefs—became suspect, tarnished with bad taste in the eyes of the elites seized with nostalgia for the lost mother country. As this process occurred, the word “negro,” formerly a generic term, acquired a pejorative meaning. As for that of ‘African,’ it always has been and is the most humiliating term by which a Haitian can be addressed. Strictly speaking, the most distinguished person in this country would rather that someone found a resemblance between him and an Eskimo or a Samoan or a Tongan rather than to recall his Guinean or Sudanese origins.<sup>96</sup>

The predicament of blackness is further explained against the discourse of hierarchy of values resulting in a crisis of identity and the devaluation of Black humanity. The term Negro becomes a scornful word and a synonym for inferiority. He declares :

*Il en résulta le phénomène suivant à savoir que le type standard ayant été le blanc, plus on s’en rapprochait plus on s’élevait dans la hiérarchie des valeurs, tandis que, à l’inverse le noir ayant été synonyme d’infériorité, le terme negre devint péjoratif. Personne ne voulut être negre et même maintenant personne n’entend être negre, pas même ceux d’entre les hommes dont la carnation en porte l’irrécusable témoignage.<sup>97</sup>*

It is this same Price-Mars who would expediently remind his Haitian patriots that “The thread of oral traditions derived from overseas. When one submits these traditions to a comparative examination, they immediately reveal that Africa, for the most part, is their land of origin...Well, we only will have the opportunity of being ourselves if we do not repudiate any part of our ancestral heritage. Now, this heritage is eight-tenths a gift of Africa.”<sup>98</sup> Price-Mars’ commitment to Black consciousness and racial pride in the Black Diaspora has influenced many Black thinkers both in the Caribbean and in Western Europe, including Leopold Sedar Senghor who dubbed Jean Price-Mars “the Father of the Negritude.” Price-Mars biographer Jacques Antoine asserts that “Price-Mars’ mental courage before the predicament of the Haitian masses and the shortcomings of the Haitian elite has its source, not in despair but in the unswerving faith he had in his race—the Black Race.”<sup>99</sup> In an important article, authors Gerarde Magloire and Kevin A. Yelvington add that “Price-Mars avowedly sought to renovate and redeem Haiti precisely by prescribing the place of ‘Africa’ within the nation.”<sup>100</sup>

The mulatto ideology and interpretation of the Haitian History is that Haiti, by the virtue of the Haitian Revolution, is a symbol of Black dignity and proud, “where black and mulatto— all sons of Africa—live in harmony under the leadership of the most enlightened class, which is that group descended from *anciens libres*.”<sup>101</sup>

While Haitian mulatto historians and intellectuals refuted the doctrine of the inequality of the human races and the ideology that the White race was the superior race, ambivalently, “They believed Africa to be barbarous, or at least relatively backward, and they were generally in favor of rooting out those customs and beliefs in Haiti which derived from Africa”<sup>102</sup> including the Afro-Haitian religion of Vodou, which they condemned and perceived as magic, sorcery, and a superstition. To provide a better historical understanding of the Vodou religion and its role in the Haitian society, it sufficed for Price-Mars to discuss in detail its African origin to his audience. The word “Vodou” (French) or “Vodoun” (Fon) translates as “spirit.” Price-Mars sustains the thesis that “*Vodoun e gni Alahounou; Mahou oue do Vodou: The Spirit is a thing of God; God possesses the Spirit.*”<sup>103</sup> The Afro-Haitian Vodou has its origin in African religious animism. In the next division of the essay, we shall consider the essence of African religion considered animistic.

### **African Traditional Religion as Animism**

As previously seen in the second part of the chapter, the precise nature of African traditional religion is a matter of scholarly contestation and speculation. Scholars of religion have made different propositions concerning the nature of African religion and the religious ideas of African people. Foremost, unlike the Abrahamic religious traditions and certain Eastern religions, African traditional religion does not have a sacred text, a set of (theological) dogmas, and a foundational historical figure. Price-Mars acknowledges that African animism does not have a codified set of doctrine nor does its adherents subscribe to some rigid sacred texts on African ethics. He has remarked that African animism has tried to purify itself against negative influences and the caricatures of magic and superstition similarly as Christianity has fought for centuries against “*les sectes dissidentes, a defender les livres saints contre des surcharges, des falsifications de texte avant de se constituer au corps de doctrine.*”<sup>104</sup> George I. K. Tasié puts forth, “It is not a missionary religion per se: there is no messianic expectation or apocalyptic warnings of the end of the world.”<sup>105</sup> It is noted that African indigenous religion is largely oral and its belief and practices are preserved in the memory of living persons—cultic functionaries, elders, opinion leaders and other custodians of cultural and religious traditions—and passed on by word of mouth from generation to generation. This feature of African indigenous religion has left it much disadvantaged, exposing most of its doctrines and dogmas to “additions and subtractions, modifications and distortions, exaggerations and confusions, so that it is difficult to separate the truth from the fiction.”<sup>106</sup>

The structural elements of African traditional religion include various religious sources: liturgy, songs, myths, stories, legends, proverbs, idioms, prayers, etc. According to Idowu, African songs are closely related to the religious sensibility of African people; they “constitute a rich heritage of all Africa...Singing is always a vehicle conveying certain sentiments or truth.

When they are connected with rituals, they convey the faith of worshippers from the heart—faith in Deity, belief in and about the divinities, assurance and hopes about the present and with regard to the hereafter.”<sup>107</sup> In the same respect, he makes the following observation:

Every cult has its set liturgy. Liturgy consists of the pattern as well as the subject-matter of worship. It is her in fact that “experiential participation” will be of immense benefit to the researcher. In an unwritten liturgy (or any liturgy), the thing does not sound the same when recited outside the context of actual worship. In fact, experience shows that very often it is either inaccurately said or stumblingly said... There is usually a certain body of systematic recitals connected with the cult of the oracle divinity.... And finally, we have those pithy sayings, proverbs and adages, which are the sine qua non of African speech. These are to be found in abundance everywhere and it can be astonishing how much they alone could teach us about religion in Africa... These are oral traditions constitute the scriptures as well as the breviaries of African traditional religion: therefore, no one can expect to see the religion from the inside unless he proceeds through them. They are, in fact, probably of more value to the student than some printed scriptures and common orders, because they are indeed “living and active.”<sup>108</sup>

P. A. Talbot in his investigation of the religion practiced in Southern Nigeria came to this conclusion that African traditional religion is comparable to that of the ancient Egyptians:

On the whole, the religion strongly resembles that of the ancient Egyptians, who combined a belief in the existence of an omnipotent and omniscient Supreme God... with that in multitudes of subordinate deities...<sup>109</sup>

Similarly, E. Geoffrey Parrinder, having lived in West Africa and studied the religion of the people in Ibadan, comes to this inference, “It would be useful to devise a term which would denote religion that have a supreme God and also worship other gods.”<sup>110</sup> Idowu prefers the theoretical concept of “diffused monotheism” or “implicit monotheism” to characterize the totality of the religious experience and practices of African people. As he has remarked in his ethnographic investigation of the Yoruba religion and Yoruba notion of God:

I do not know any of any places in Africa where the intimacy is not accorded to God. That is why, because this is very true of the Yoruba, I conclude that the religion can only be adequately described as monotheistic. I modify this “monotheism” by the adjective “diffused,” because here we have a monotheism in which there exist other powers which derive from Deity such being and authority that they can be treated, for practical purposes, almost as ends in themselves.<sup>111</sup>

Complementarily, he writes with greater precision and clarity in this manner:

African traditional religion cannot be described as polytheistic. Its appropriate description is monotheistic, however modified this may be. The modification is however inevitable because of the presence of other divine beings within the structure of the religion.<sup>112</sup>

Unlike Parrinder and others who have used the idea of “polytheism” to describe the African experience in religion, Idowu is reluctant in using this mischaracterization. According to him, “implicit monotheism” suitably represents the religious practice of African people throughout ages and generations:

We may compare the system among the system among the Yoruba where we have divinities who appear to be completely autonomous, each with his or her own priesthood and set of rituals. A priest will hear, for example, the title of Osogun (the priest of Ogun) or Olobatala (the priest of Obatala). But the unity of the whole is manifested phenomenologically in that the head of the whole community is the Pontifex Maximus of all the cults together. Hence the saying, “Every festival is the king’s festival.” And, of course, none of the cults have any meaning apart from Oldumare, the Supreme God.<sup>113</sup>

Parrinder, Smith, Mbiti, Danquah, and Idowu have not employed animism as a religious symbolic for the African piety. By comparison, Price-Mars has embraced this representative idea to describe the totality of religious life of African people. Nonetheless, before Price-Mars would use the idea of animism to describe the religious experience of Africa, it was Edward Tylor, in 1871, who had coined the word “animism” to theorize the origin of religion, and more precisely that the genesis of religion is rooted in the idea of soul rather than of ghost or the belief in ghosts rather than in souls.<sup>114</sup> Hence, two theories are used to describe the beginning of religion: the ghost theory and the soul theory. Pritchard expounds on the utilization of the concept of animism in the discipline of anthropology:

Some ambiguity attaches to the term “animism” in anthropological writings, it being sometimes employed in the sense of the belief, ascribed to primitive peoples, that not only creatures but also inanimate objects have life and personality, and sometimes with the further sense that in addition they have souls. Tylor’s theory covers both senses.<sup>115</sup>

Pritchard, however, attempts to correct the misconception in anthropological imagination of the religious experience:

Both the ghost theory and the soul theory might be regarded as two versions of a dream theory of the origin of religion. Primitive man then transferred this idea of soul to other creatures in some ways like himself, and even to inanimate objects which aroused his interest. The soul, being detachable from whatever it lodged in, could be thought of as independent of its material home, whence arose the idea of spiritual beings, whose supposed existence constituted Tylor's minimum definition of religion; and these finally developed into gods, beings vastly superior to man and in control of his destiny.<sup>116</sup>

Although Pritchard's theory had had its heyday, it does not do justice to the so-called revelatory and Abrahamic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. According to these religious traditions, it was God himself who had revealed himself to humanity and initiated the first religious experience, in which both men and women were invited to participate in and fellowship with him. Though Price-Mars was quite aware of the scholarly studies on the possible origins of the Abrahamic faiths, theoretically, as a trained anthropologist, he was unorthodox in his religious imagination; his ideas about the nature of religion in general were very close to his contemporary anthropologists and ethnologists. Price-Mars does maintain that African people were not polytheist but animist monotheist. He puts forth unapologetically the idea that animism is the religion universal of Africa: "*L'Animisme, voila la religion de l'Afrique.*"<sup>117</sup> He also adds, "*Même lorsqu'il a cédé à des courants de fanatisme qui ont implanté chez lui l'étendard du Prophète ou la croix du Christ, le negre reste fort souvent un animiste.*"<sup>118</sup> Hence, the religious sensibility of African people is expressed toward animistic piety. Price-Mars goes on to comment on the different forms of African animism known throughout Africa, under different names such as *Obi* or *Obia*.

In Western Africa, African people subscribed to an animist religious worldview in which the religion of the Dahomey was "*Le prototype avec son incarnation de l'Etre suprême dans Mahou ou Mawu, dieu adrogyne du ciel, et la multiplicité des puissances intermédiaires qui se manifestent dans les différentes modalités des panthéons dahoméens. Tous ces déités sont autant d'esprits ou Vodou dont les cultes se matérialisent en manifestations diverses.*"<sup>119</sup>

African religion is closely bonded with the land, the natural world, and the ancestral hosts, and African deities are concomitant to the object (s) of association or the object (s) of worship. African deities embody and dwell in various natural phenomena.

*Tous les phénomènes de la nature ont leurs dieux majeurs ou mineurs—dieu du ciel, de la terre, des eaux, du tonnerre, etc. Tous les ancêtres veillent sur les vivants comme des êtres surnaturels et invisibles qui habitent l'espace impalpable. Tous sont objet de culte. Tous sont des esprits ou des Vodou auxquels on doit hommage et respect.*<sup>120</sup>

Because of the complexity of the African religious system and African metaphysics, Price-Mars infers that African religion does not make any logical sense to the Western mind:

*Celui qui écrit ces lignes de rend bien compte lorsqu'il essaie de pénétrer la complexité de la théogonie dahoméenne, combien il lui est difficile de traduire en termes exacts une métaphysique qui se dérobe par ses subtilités et sa fluidité aux « raideurs ambitieuses de la logique » occidentale. »*<sup>121</sup>

The complexity of African religion is related to the African God who is an intricate Being.

Price-Mars also observes that « *C'est la concrétisation de sa foi en Celui en qu'il reconnaît le dispensateur toutes choses et le maître suprême du destin.* »<sup>122</sup> Price-Mars equates the religion of the (African) Spirits with Haitian Vodou, and explains further that religion is intrinsically linked to the social and political life of the Dahomean people. In fact, religion gives order to society and politics : « *La religion des esprits ou des dieux, autrement dit la religion du vodou avec son ritualisme enchevêtré et sa formidable puissance traditionnelle qui est l'ossature même de l'organisation social et politique du Dahomey et particulièrement du royaume de Ouida.* »<sup>123</sup> While Price-Mars has argued that the religion of the Dahomey has substantial import on the popular belief of the Haitian masses, he did not say whether the religion of the spirits has provided both social and political structure in the Haitian society. Perhaps, this is due to the proselytization process of Haitian Christianity and Vodou in the time of the slavery in which Christianity has reordered the cultural fabric and the colonial and political order in Saint-Domingue. Elsewhere, he recapitulates his argument that Haiti's ancestral faith is rooted on African soil:

*Le sentiment et le phénomène religieux chez les Congos comprenant ceux du littoral c'est-à-dire les francs-Congos et ceux d'Angola et du Mozambique appelés Bas-Congo. Eh bien, ceux-là aussi ont été touchés par la propagande islamique...En résumé, et au terme de notre analyse, il nous paraît possible de tirer cette conclusion légitime que la grande masse des negres arraches de divers points de l'Afrique et amenés à Saint-Domingue furent des gens pieux attaches à la fois musulmane, dahoméenne et même un peu catholique. »*<sup>124</sup>

Moreover, he elaborates on the nature of African animism by defining as a viable religion or a complete religious system that constitutes not only of a body of doctrines, but in certain regions in Africa such as in the Sudanese, animism comprises of a genuine hierarchical priesthood that governs or perpetuate the religion. These religious chiefs, known as “Bougho” or “Hogon” –meaning “fire” or the heat of fire—are found especially in the mountainous regions of South-East Sudan.<sup>125</sup> African religious priests, according to Price-Mars’ observation, “go through initiation ceremonies and are devoted to an austere life which gives them the great moral authority they enjoy. This animism, which divides the forces of the universe, pays tribute to spiritual geniuses which they embody. African animism, ultimately, renders to the dead ancestors a cult of veneration and implores their blessings and protection.”<sup>126</sup> He projects that “in order to assure the perpetuity of the cult, the Sudanese have achieved a half-political, half-religious organization. The treasures of tradition and the defense of the community rest on the authority of a Council formed of all the heads of families whose advanced age constitutes a guarantee vulnerability.”<sup>127</sup> One of the responsibilities of this religious-political leader and priest, who lives alone but among the people, is to interpret the will of the deity and to make his will known to the people.

The organization of religious worship among the Sudanese plateau is well organized and a complex system. Sudanese animism comprises various natural forces and energies that are spiritualized such as the sunlight, abundant and energetic; the earth, maternal and protective; the moon, regulator of the seasons, symbol and rhythm of time. If there are other elements near this triad to which the Sudanese imagination lends mysterious and formidable power, it is those responding to the character of Laggan, servant of malevolent divinities. It is probably the dualism of these two dissimilar cults, the one more spiritualistic, the other more animistic, which reminds people of some strange influence in the religious conception of the Sudanese.<sup>128</sup>

On one hand, Price-Mars remarks that the cult of animism is sometimes materialized in concrete symbols; on the other hand, he posits that animism does not contradict the religion of the unique and sovereign God and the supreme Master of the universe.<sup>129</sup> Price-Mars moves forward to deduce the dynamics between God, the intermediary spirits, and the individual worshippers. In Price-Mars’ thought, God is not only a transcendent Being, his relationship with these Spirit-agents at time of their creation is well established. He made them according to the purpose he has designed for each one individually. Price-Mars could remark that African people believe that the tutelary divinity has too high a position to be engrossed in the petty affairs of his creatures. Having accomplished his work, this divinity has established between men and himself a class of invisible intermediaries (spirits, names) who alone are accessible and consequently must always be addressed in order to obtain favors and blessings from on high...The animism of Negroes is therefore nothing other than a religion of primitive men. I do not know if all primitive peoples in all ages have worshipped the Unknowable in the same ways.<sup>130</sup>



## **African Traditional Religious Ethics and Critique of Price-Mars theory of African Religious Animism**

Price-Mars does not refer to the African God as an “animist deity.” As seen in previous analysis, he does characterize African traditional religion as animist. While many African religious scholars have accepted animism to describe the nature of African traditional religion, others have rejected the label altogether. J. Omosade Awolalu argues that we should not label the entirety of the religious experience of African people as animistic; as he pronounces:

From our own study of the African Traditional Religion, we find there are unmistakably elements of animism...We also need to add that it would be wrong to categorize the whole religion as animism. Every religion has some belief in the existence of the spirit. Even Christianity sees ‘God as Spirit, and they that worship are to worship in spirit and truth. In other words, animism is a part definition of every religion. But to say that African Traditional Religion is animistic would not be correct.<sup>131</sup>

While Price-Mars acknowledges the morphological diversity of African animism, he concurs that its fundamental unity is certain and unwavering. He also confirms the external influence and the incorporation of foreign elements in African animism. In addition, Price-Mars explicates the doctrine of the human nature, and the function of the human soul and body in African religious animism. He also expounds on the doctrine of death and life after death in African religious thought; to these matters, we shall now turn:

African animism could be summed up in a few very simple propositions: 1<sup>st</sup>, each man is composed to a double personality, one physical, tangible, material—the body; the other, intangible, immaterial, embodied in the first as its animator—the soul; 2<sup>nd</sup>, death is the operation by which these two elements are broken apart—the soul is separated from the body.<sup>132</sup>

In a comparative analysis, he explains in detail the concept of death and the view of destiny of the soul after death among various groups of African people including the Loago, the Gabons, and the Mandingo people. In African traditional theology, the soul and the body are two different entities belonging to the individual. While the body may decay and even ceases to be, the soul never dies. The soul, however, after death reincarnates elsewhere. It is clear there are theological differences about the body and soul among the ethnic groups mentioned below.

What does this soul or spirit become after death? According to the Bantus of Loango, the *M-Zimu* or *Mu-Zimu* (soul or spirit) searches for another habitat immediately after the cessation of life in the corporal body, which is after all only a reincarnation, while for other peoples this element wanders about randomly or remains near human habitations. Moreover, the Gabons accept a dual spiritual principle, the *Mu-Zimu* and *l'ombwiri*. This *ombwiri* is a tutelary spirit which is attached to each individual although it may be independent of him. It vanishes from the person at his death and remains invisible although it devotes itself to guarding the group. It is a superior spirit among good spirits. The Mandingo, on their part, establish a difference between the *dia*, vital breath, and the *niama*, spirit. Death is the cessation of the vital breath while the *niama* survives the destruction of the body... On the whole, it seems indisputable that the African Negro made a very clear distinction between the body and the soul of humans.<sup>133</sup>

Price-Mars does affirm theological diversity within African traditional religion. By any means, he presents African animism as a homogeneous religious system or tradition. He does affirm the unity within its diversity. As noted, Price-Mars has brilliantly argued that “African animism” is a genuine religion comparable to other religions in the world, and has informed us that the adherent in the bush as the man of the forest has a tutelary deity, thus making personal the religious experience of African people. Price-Mars moves forward to validate the moral value of this belief. Price-Mars admits the relativism of religious morality by stating “*Evidemment, si la morale est en définitive un réseau d’interdits, un code de tabous dont l’observance garanti l’individu contre des infractions préjudiciables à son bonheur personnel et au bonheur de la communauté à laquelle il appartient, il ne peut y avoir de religion sans morale et, également, il ne saurait exister de Société sans une morale publique et privée.*”<sup>134</sup>

It is worth nothing at this juncture of the conversation that in Post-Price-Marsian scholarship, both Mbiti and Idowu would expound on these religious ideas and the theology of the body and soul as they are interpreted in African traditional religion. Price-Mars turns to another aspect of African animism: its theological ethics. First of all, he pronounces that «*Dans toute l’étendue de l’Afrique, dans les tribus comme dans les Etas organisés, l’individu obéit à des règles d’autant plus étroites et tatillonnes que ces communautés en tiennent l’observance comme commandement des dieux.*”<sup>135</sup> The following ethical and moral principles (theological ethics) are, according to Price-Mars, “*the common stock one may find at the base of all the African religions.*”<sup>136</sup> Secondly, he proceeds to articulate seven cardinal ethical principles regarding the moral vision of African traditional religion. African people adhere to a rigid moral code, which regulate their life and human relations and social interactions.

1. “A prohibition on killing, except for an enemy of the tribe” (“*Défense de tuer, si ce n’est un ennemi de la Tribu*”);
2. “A prohibition on stealing, or a ban on casting a bad spell over an individual” (“*Défense de voler, de jeter le mauvais sort*”);
3. “Interdiction of sexual relations between the spouses during the period of breastfeeding and menstruation” (“*Interdiction de relations matrimoniales entre époux pendant la période de l’allaitement et de la menstruation*”);
4. “A ban against women not to participate in religious services during their menstruation” (“*Défense aux femmes de participer au service divin a cette dernière période*”);
5. “Punishment for adultery” (“*Punition de l’adultère*”);
6. “Respect for the elderly, to the Spirits and the interpreters of their will, to the sacred places, and in general, to everything consecrated to them” (“*Respect du aux vieillards, aux esprits et aux interpretes de leur volonté, aux lieux réservés a leur rendre le culte, et, en général, a tout ce qui leur est consacré*”);
7. “Obedience to those held public places or religious authorities, such as those who have set apart by the will of the Spirits” (“*Obeissance aux chefs detenteurs de la puissance publique, tels qu’ils ont été consacrés par la volonté des esprits*”)<sup>137</sup>

Arguably, these moral codes are on par with those of the Abrahamic religion. Price-Mars asserts that the moral codes and theological doctrines of African traditional religion are not written in a sacred text; rather they are “transmitted from age to age by oral tradition, that it assumes *ipso facto* an esoteric character.”<sup>138</sup> He denies the idea that these ethical values are found explicitly or only in African indigenous religion. He insists that these religious-based virtues are shared by all religious traditions, and that these prohibitions constitute all the religious elementary forms—from the simplest to the most complex. He explains further that African religion had “governed their society [African societies] with interdictions similar to those in the law of Moses.”<sup>139</sup> For example, he compares the African religious ethical principles to the famous precepts (the 10 Commandments or the “10 words” as it is correctly translated from the Hebrew) of Judaism and Christianity Yahweh revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai. Hence, he could argue that, African (Black) ethics and Jewish ethics, double face of a same coin, have a common divine source or origin, and that it seems that this is an indication of a universal phenomenon that is integral to the very nature of man.

*Je me demande si tous ces interdits ne forment pas l’ossature de toutes les formes religieuses, les plus simples comme les plus complexes. N’est-il pas vrai qu’il suffirait des stéréotypes en formules saisissantes pour qu’elles ressemblent comme des sœurs jumelles aux fameux préceptes que Iaveh dicta à Moïse du haut du Sinaï : Tu ne tueras point (probablement l’homme de ta tribu. Tu ne voleras point. Tu ne commettras point d’adultère. Tu n’auras point d’autres dieux devant ma face, etc... En définitive, moral negre, moral juive, double face d’une même médaille. Il y a là, ce me semble, un phénomène d’ordre universel qui est inhérent à la qualité d’homme.*<sup>140</sup>

Consequently, he could reason as in follows: “If one defines man a religious animal, one can say yet, a gregarious animal subjected to the rule, in a final moral being”<sup>141</sup> (“*Si on a définie l’homme un animal religieux, on peut en dire encore, un animal gregaire soumis a la regle, en definitive un etre moral.*”)

## **African Religion in the Haitian Milieu**

Price-Mars invites his readers to reason with him in this manner that if the most original primitive African is naturally endowed with a religious status equally to that of other people, isn’t it evident that African people of Saint-Domingue have not left their traces in the history of worship in the organized Islam, Dahomean or simply animism?<sup>142</sup> At this juncture in the conversation, Price-Mars is linking the faith of the African descent people in Saint-Domingue-Haiti with the ancestral faith of the West African people. According to him, the enslaved African people never ceased to believe in and pray to the Spirits, Allah, or Mahou. In other words, the enslaved African people at Saint-Domingue assimilated animistic, Islamic, Dahomean, and Christian beliefs in their religious activities and rituals; nonetheless, Price-Mars sustains the idea that it was the Dahomean religion that provided a solid framework of disciplinary traditions, sacerdotal hierarchy, and set of beliefs to the enslaved population.<sup>143</sup> He also clarifies that in the historical milieu of Saint-Domingue

*Non seulement le rite dahoméen n’est pas resté intégral dans ce travail d’absorption, mais le folklore peut en une certaine mesure identifier, dans la mosaïque de croyances parvenus jusqu’à nous sous cette dénomination, les juxtapositions, les apports de plusieurs confessions qui ont contribué à sa formation.*<sup>144</sup>

In addition, Price-Mars, in writing *The Vocation of the Elite* in 1919, was not persuaded that the Haitian people of his days were fully and exclusively committed to the Christian faith when they converted from their ancestral religion of Vodou. He maintained that their “conversion to Christianity is only superficial.”<sup>145</sup> It is for this same reason he could write the following paragraph about the ambiguity of the Haitian experience in religion and its indecisive rapport between Christianity and ancestral faith.

For the overwhelming majority of the population, latent animism coexists with belief in the Christian creed. The African gods have not quite surrendered before Jesus of Nazareth. Believe me, for many of us of the elite class, who pride ourselves on being devout Christians, the juxtaposition of the two faiths and the cooperation between them is something of a double insurance against the mysteries of the hereafter.<sup>146</sup>

Price-Mars claims that the evangelization and conversion of enslaved African people to Christianity in colonial Saint-Domingue was a religious crisis because the enslaved African population was violently introduced to the Christian faith—against their will. As he observes, “But this situation is not recent. It flourishes even centuries ago when slaves newly arrived From Africa rushed in their numbers to be baptized, although the process failed to destroy their fetishism. They simply became baptized to avoid the mockery and ragging which the *bossales* suffered at the hand of the creole slaves.”<sup>147</sup> The continual practice and devotion to the African-derived religions—i.e. Vodou, Santeria, Obeah, Candomblé, Xango, Batuque, Cantimbo, Macumba, etc.) in the Black Diaspora is a remarkable phenomenon that demonstrates the endurance and resilience of African traditional religion in the midst of external influences. On the other hand, if Price-Mars were alive today, he would probably be surprised about the religious diversity in contemporary Haitian society, and the radical turn of the Haitian people toward Protestant Christianity, and correspondingly the slow emergence of Islam in the Haitian culture. Sociologists of religion specializing on Haitian religion such as Lewis Ampidu Clormeus, Terry Rey, and others have estimated that the contemporary Haitian society is professedly 30 to 40 % Protestant.<sup>148</sup>

Price-Mars, who often equates the religion of the Dahomean with Haitian Vodou reckons that the mystery of the Vodou religion lies in the fact that Vodou is the origin of all religions. To make such a claim is to suppose that Vodou is a religious tradition that syncretizes all religious faiths. In Vodou, the adherents greet the bantou divinities such as the *E gun* of the people of Congo; the Sudanese deities such as Mana of the Mandigues people; and in addition, the adherents equally worship the Christian God and several Catholic saints.<sup>149</sup> By affirming that African animism (the religion of the spirits) is the root of all world religions, Price-Mars is sustaining the notion that African people were the first people in the history of human civilization to articulate a religious consciousness and to worship God the Creator (Mahou). He reiterates the famous statement made by the father of Western history, Herodotus, about ancient Egypt that “The African is the most religious of all people.”<sup>150</sup>

In addition to his discussion of African traditional religion (animism), Price-Mars has also argued that Africa is the home of Christianity and Islam. The African people and their descendants in the African diaspora were united by communities of language and religion. The Muslim faith had existed in northern Africa, the Dahomean vodu in the central region, and the Muslim faith mixed with some Catholicism in the south. All of these faiths, Price-Mars emphasized, had rested on the belief of a unitary god, which meant that despite the classic interpretation as a land of fetishism, many African people had not been worshipping physical objects.<sup>151</sup>

What Price-Mars has offered to us in the previous analysis correlates to Idowu’s own conclusion about the close links between geography, migration, locality, religious belief, and culture. As one may observe in this informative paragraph:

When we look at Africa with reference to beliefs, our first impression is of certain objective phenomena which appear to be made up of systems of beliefs and practices which are unrelated except in so far as they are loosely held together by the factors of common localities and languages. But a careful look, through actual observation and comparative discussions with Africans from various parts of the continent, will show, first and foremost, that there is a common factor which the coined word *negritude* will express aptly. There is a common Africanness about the total culture and religious beliefs and practices of Africa. This common factor may be due either to the fact of diffusion or to the fact that most Africans share common origins with regard to race and customs and religious practices. In certain cases, one could trace specific cultural or religious elements which are common over wide areas which lie proximate to one another; and often there are elements which jump over whole territories to re-appear in several others scattered areas on the continent.<sup>152</sup>

## Concluding Thoughts

In our analysis in this essay, we have observed Price-Mars's emphasis on the viability of African traditional religion. Price-Mars's basic argument is a clarion call upon us all to acknowledge the merits of African traditional religion, and pre-colonial African kingdoms and civilizations, and establish the connective links and the cultural practices and traditions between Africa, Haiti, and the rest of the Black Diaspora. In *Ainsi parla l'Oncle* and other writings he has produced, Price-Mars's overarching goal was to establish direct links between Africa and the Black Diaspora, especially with his country of birth: Haiti. Ultimately, Price-Mars should be regarded as one of the early pioneers who had inaugurated the academic study of African traditional religion in the Black Diaspora.

In summary, through the role of the Spirit-agents of African traditional religion, Price-Mars establishes close intimacy between God and African people. In this way, no one could speak truthfully of the absence of God in Africa and the African way of life. Price-Mars has not discussed the precise manner in which God has disclosed himself in the historic past to African cultures and in African religion. Through the comparative method, he has shown that African people have developed a conception of God that is similar to that of the Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christian, and Islam. Through the comparative method, he has also demonstrated that African traditional religion also shared a similar ethical system and moral values to those of revelatory religions, and that the African God is not a strange and ethnic deity created by the African mind. As conceived in major religious traditions, God is the Supreme Ruler and Creator of the universe who had not been hidden from his creation and his people. This God is not silent and has not been distant in the African or black way of life.

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- <sup>1</sup> For an analysis of Price-Mars' religious worldview and sensibility, see Celucien L. Joseph, "The Religious Philosophy of Jean Price-Mars", *Journal of Black Studies* 43.6 (2012): 620–645, and "The Religious Imagination and Ideas of Jean Price-Mars (Part 1)," *Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion* 2:14 (December 2011):1-31.
- <sup>2</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 125.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.
- <sup>4</sup> Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 2.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.
- <sup>6</sup> Kimball, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, 1.
- <sup>7</sup> Parrinder, *World Religions: From Ancient History to the Present*, 10.
- <sup>8</sup> Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 27.
- <sup>9</sup> Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 27.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.
- <sup>12</sup> Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 133-4.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 135.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 135-6.
- <sup>18</sup> Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 136.
- <sup>19</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 146.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 146-7.
- <sup>21</sup> Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 137.
- <sup>22</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 107.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 116, 121-5.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.
- <sup>28</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 128-9.
- <sup>29</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 115.
- <sup>30</sup> Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, 109-134; Hackett, *Art and Religion in Africa*, 10.
- <sup>31</sup> Frieder Ludwig & Afe Adogame, "Historiography and European Perceptions of African Religious History," in Ludwig and Adogame, *European Traditions in the Study of Religions in Africa*, 4.
- <sup>32</sup> Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 78.
- <sup>33</sup> Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 92.

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- <sup>34</sup> E. W. Smith, *African Ideas of God*, 1.
- <sup>35</sup> Qtd in Smith, *African Ideas of God*, 1.
- <sup>36</sup> Qtd in E. G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, 14.
- <sup>37</sup> Qtd in Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, 14.
- <sup>38</sup> Frieder Ludwig & Afe Adogame, "Historiography and European Perceptions of African Religious History," in Ludwig and Adogame, *European Traditions in the Study of Religions in Africa*, 6.
- <sup>39</sup> P'Bitek, *Decolonizing African Religions*, 1.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>42</sup> Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, 8.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-11.
- <sup>44</sup> P'Bitek, *Decolonizing African Religions*, 32.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.
- <sup>47</sup> Okot P'Bitek, *Decolonizing African Religions*, 23.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-2.
- <sup>49</sup> P'Bitek, *Decolonizing African Religions*, 52.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.
- <sup>51</sup> Parrinder, *West African Religion*, 17-18.
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-22
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.
- <sup>55</sup> Parrinder, *West African Religion*, 14.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.
- <sup>57</sup> Smith, "Foreword," in Parrinder, *West African Tradition*, xi.
- <sup>58</sup> Smith, "Foreword," in Parrinder, *West African Tradition*, xii.
- <sup>59</sup> Smith, "Foreword," in Parrinder, *West African Tradition*, xii-xiii.
- <sup>60</sup> Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, 19.
- <sup>61</sup> Smith, "Foreword," in Parrinder, *West African Tradition*, xiii.
- <sup>62</sup> Danfulani, "West African Religions in European Scholarship," in Ludwig and Adogame, *European Traditions in the Study of Religions in Africa*, 356.
- Adogame, *European Traditions in the Study of Religions in Africa*, 357.



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<sup>64</sup> Danfulani, "West African Religions in European Scholarship," in Ludwig and Adogame, *European Traditions in the Study of Religions in Africa*, 357.

<sup>65</sup> Hackett, *Art and Religion in Africa*, 9.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 92.

<sup>68</sup> Gerarde Magloire and Kevin A. Yelvington, "Haiti and the anthropological imagination," 15.

<sup>69</sup> Antoine, *Jean Price-Mars and Haiti*, 129.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>72</sup> Price-Mars, *Formation ethnique...*37. "A new creation: it is neither the intangible reproduction of Dahomean animism, nor the black magic that the foolish merchants, with their pen, so denounce maliciously and accuse the Haitian people of witchcraft, cannibalism, and spells."

<sup>73</sup> Price-Mars, *Une Etape de l'Evolution haïtienne*, 9. "And first, before 1789, at Saint-Domingue, one could legitimately assume that the negro was incapable of rising above a certain primary level of knowledge. Not only they have ignored the historical past of civilizations, but neither comparative ethnography nor anthropology, despite the uncertainty of their present methods, had yet been invented. Moreover, the negro had no value, but only of his structure and endurance."

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 92. "They have been obsessed by the general misconception that the Europeans made or have made about African religions. For all the writers of General History, for all geographers, travelers, explorers, and for the first essayists in the history of religions, Africa is the classic land of fetishism."

<sup>75</sup> Price-Mars, *Une Etape de l'Evolution haïtienne*, 92.

<sup>76</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 83.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Price-Mars, *Une Etape de l'Evolution haïtienne*, 93.

<sup>79</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 84.

<sup>80</sup> Price-Mars, *Une Etape de l'Evolution haïtienne*, 93. "He introduced it into the everyday (common) language by assigning it the role of being at the origin of all religions."

<sup>81</sup> Price-Mars, *Une Etape de l'Evolution haïtienne*, 93.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.; Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 84.

<sup>83</sup> Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief*, 2.

<sup>84</sup> Rattray, *Religion & Art in Ashanti*, 24.

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<sup>85</sup> Price-Mars, *Une Etape de l'Evolution haïtienne*, 93. "The Portuguese observation was only part of the phenomenon it claimed to qualify and explain. Fetishism is not a religion. Black Africans do not pay homage to material things. They worship the spirit they believe to be embodied in certain forms of matter and especially in the great cosmic forces: The Sea, the Earth, the Rivers, the Forest, etc. This is what modern science, through careful research, has called Animism."

<sup>86</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 84.

<sup>87</sup> Price-Mars, *Une Etape de l'Evolution haïtienne*, 106. "Magic is only the counterfeit of religion; superstition is only the distortion or the caricature."

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 109. "As long as it is true that superstition is universal, one could even venture the aphorism: superstition is the fatal corollary of religion."

<sup>89</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 149.

<sup>90</sup> Price-Mars, *Une Etape de l'Evolution haïtienne*, 10. "For about three hundred years, the race lived in a state of moral and intellectual stagnation of incomparable baseness. It goes without saying that this means the large population of the enslaved, the black world."

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 15. "The pure race is a myth in anthropology. On the contrary, human miscegenation is a biological fact as certain and indelible as the attachment of our organism to some of the more humble type of the animal kingdom."

<sup>92</sup> Price-Mars, *Une Etape de l'Evolution haïtienne*, 138. "God ... who is infinitely wise, just and good ... God, in his infinite wisdom, has not made the black race an inferior race."

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>94</sup> Price-Mars, "From So Uncle Said," In Fred Lee Hord, and Jonathan Scott Lee, *I Am Because We Are: Readings in Black Philosophy*, 150.

<sup>95</sup> Price-Mars, "From So Uncle Said," translated by Betts, *The Ideology of Blackness*, 88; also cited in *I Am Because We Are: Readings in Black Philosophy*, edited by Fred Lee Hord, and Jonathan Scott Lee, 145.

<sup>96</sup> Price-Mars, "From So Uncle Said," In Hord and Lee, *I Am Because We Are: Readings in Black Philosophy*, 146.

<sup>97</sup> Price-Mars, *La République d'Haïti et la République Dominicaine. Tome II*, 26. "The result was to find out precisely about the standard of whiteness; the closer we arrived about it associates with the hierarchy of values; whereas black was synonymous with inferiority. Hence, the term negro became pejorative. Nobody wanted to be a black man, and even now nobody desires to be a negro, not even among those of men whose pedigree bears the irrefutable testimony."

<sup>98</sup> Price-Mars, "From So Uncle Said," In Hord and Lee, *I Am Because We Are: Readings in Black Philosophy*, 148.

<sup>99</sup> Antoine, *Jean Price-Mars and Haïti*, 125.

<sup>100</sup> Gerarde Magloire and Kevin A. Yelvington, "Haiti and the anthropological imagination," 7.

<sup>101</sup> Nicholls, "A Work of Combat: Mulatto Historians and the Haitian Past," 34.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

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<sup>103</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 52.

<sup>104</sup> Price-Mars, *Une Etape de l'Evolution haïtienne*, 106. "the dissident sects by defending the holy books against exaggerations and falsifications of text before constituting itself into a body of doctrine."

<sup>105</sup> Tasie, "The Heritage of the Mouth: Oral Sources and the Study of African Traditional Religion," 26.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 85.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 84-5.

<sup>109</sup> Qtd in Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 135.

<sup>110</sup> Qtd in Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 135.

<sup>111</sup> Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, 135.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>113</sup> Idowu, *African Traditional Religion*, 136.

<sup>114</sup> Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, 24.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>116</sup> Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, 25.

<sup>117</sup> Price-Mars, *Une Etape de l'Evolution haïtienne*, 93. « Animism is the religion of Africa. »

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. "Even when he has yielded to expressions of fanaticism that have been implanted at his home, whether it is the banner of the Prophet or the cross of Christ, the negro forever remains an animist."

<sup>119</sup> Price-Mars, *Formation ethnique...*, 35. "The prototype, with its incarnation of the Supreme Being in Mahu or Mawu, the androgynous god of the sky, and the multiplicity of the intermediate powers manifest themselves in the different modalities of the Dahomean pantheons. All these deities are spirits or Vodou whose cults are materialized in various manifestations."

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 36. "All natural phenomena have their gods: major or minor, such as the god of the sky, earth, water, thunder, etc. All (the) ancestors as supernatural and invisible beings who inhabit the impalpable space, watch over the living. All are object of worship. All are spirits or Vodou to whom we owe homage and respect."

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. "Whoever writes these lines does well when he or she tries to penetrate the complexity of the Dahomean theogony; how difficult must it have been for him or her to translate into exact terms a metaphysics that escapes by its subtleties and fluidity the ambitious stiffness of 'Western' logic."

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 35. "It is the concretization of his faith in Him in whom he recognizes as the dispenser of all things and the supreme master of destiny."

<sup>123</sup> Price-Mars, *Formation ethnique...*, 36.

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 92. "The religious feeling and phenomenon among the Congos including those of the coastline, that is to say the French Congolese and those of Angola and Mozambique called the Lower-Congo. Well, these too have been affected by the Islamic propaganda ... in summary, and at the end of our analysis, it seems to us that it is possible to draw this legitimate conclusion that the great mass of the negroes torn from various parts of Africa and forcibly brought in Saint-Domingue were a pious people associated with the Muslim, Dahomean, and even (a few) Catholic faith."

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>126</sup> Price-Mars, *Une Etape de l'Evolution haïtienne*, 94.

<sup>127</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 94.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 96-7.

<sup>129</sup> Price-Mars, *Une Etape de l'Evolution haïtienne*, 94-5.

<sup>130</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 85-6.

<sup>131</sup> J. O. Awolalu, "What is African Traditional Religion?" 8.

<sup>132</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 87.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Price-Mars, *Une Etape de l'Evolution haïtienne*, 97. "Obviously, if morality is ultimately a network of prohibitions, and a code of taboos that guarantees the individual against prejudicial infractions to his or her personal happiness and the happiness of the community to which he or she belongs, then he or she can not have religion without morals (morality) and, also, there can be no society without a public and private morality."

<sup>135</sup> Ibid. "In all of Africa, in tribes as in organized states, the individual obeys the rules which are all the more narrow and fussy-- as these communities hold firmly their observance as the very command of the gods."

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Price-Mars, *So Spoke the Uncle*, 99.

<sup>139</sup> Magdaline Shannon, *Price-Mars, the Haitian Elite, and the American Occupation*, 63.

<sup>140</sup> Price-Mars, *Une Etape de l'Evolution haïtienne*, 98. "I wonder if all these prohibitions do not form the backbone of all religious forms, the simplest as the most complex. Is it not true that stereotypes in striking formulas would suffice to make them look like twin sisters to the famous precepts Yahweh dictated to Moses on the mount Sinai: Thou shalt not kill (probably the man of your tribe). You shall not steal. You shall not commit adultery. You shall have no other gods before me, etc. In the end, Negro morality or Jewish morality is the double face of the same coin; it seems to me that this is a phenomenon of universal order that is inherent in the quality of humanity."

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>143</sup> Price-Mars, *Une Etape de l'Evolution haïtienne*, 104.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 105. "Not only is the Dahomean rite an integral part of this process of absorption, but the folklore, to a certain degree, can be identified, in the mosaic of beliefs that have come down to us under this name, that is, the juxtapositions, the contributions of several confessions that contributed to its formation."

<sup>145</sup> Price-Mars, "The Vocation of the Elite," translated by Bernadette Farquhar, in Hume and Kamugisha, *Caribbean Cultural Thought*, 23.

<sup>146</sup> Price-Mars, "The Vocation of the Elite," translated by Farquhar, in Hume and Kamugisha, *Caribbean Cultural Thought*, 23.

<sup>147</sup> Price-Mars, "The Vocation of the Elite," translated by Farquhar, in Hume and Kamugisha, *Caribbean Cultural Thought*, 23.

<sup>148</sup> See Terry Rey, *Crossing the Water and Keeping the Faith*, 5-7 ; Lewis Ampidu Clormeus, "L'Église catholique face à la diversité religieuse à Port-au-Prince (1942-2012)," *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 155-180.

<sup>149</sup> Price-Mars, *Une Etape de l'Evolution haïtienne*, 105.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>151</sup> Shannon, *Price-Mars, the Haitian Elite, and the American Occupation*, 63.

<sup>152</sup> Idowu, *African. Traditional Religion*, 103.

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